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# THE KINDS OF POETRY

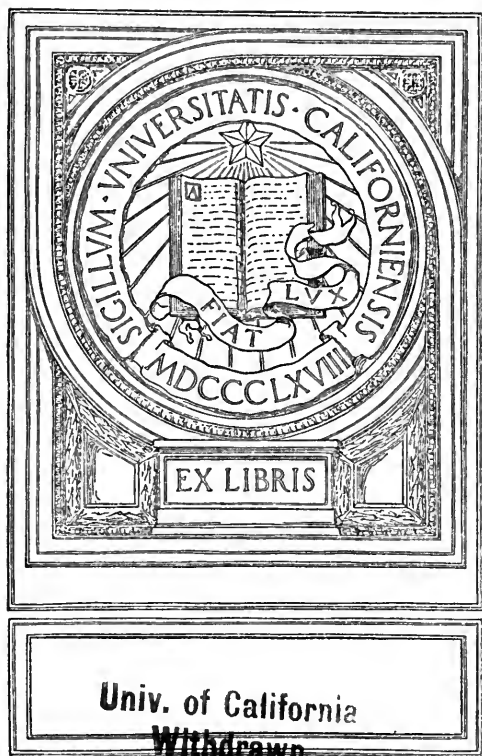
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# **THE KINDS OF POETRY**







# THE KINDS OF POETRY & OTHER ESSAYS

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BY JOHN ERSKINE

*Author of*  
**The Private Life of Helen of Troy**



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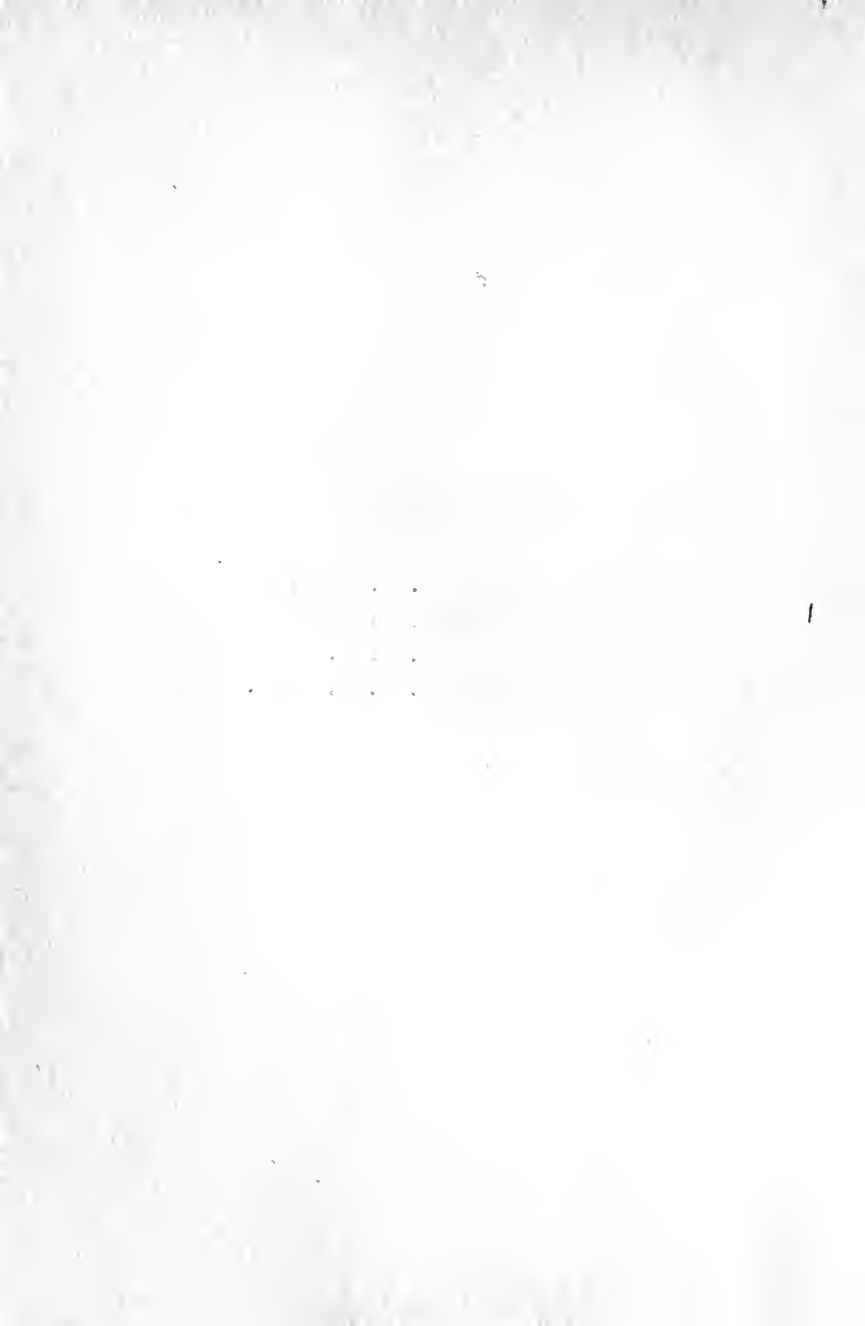
*Ad unguem*  
*Factus homo . . . non ut magis alter amicus.*





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## NOTE

Of these essays, the first appeared in the *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* for November 7, 1912; the second appeared in the *Columbia University Quarterly* for December, 1915; the third appeared in the *Yale Review* for January, 1917. The fourth essay is here printed for the first time.

It should be observed, perhaps, that the first and second essays consider chiefly the reader's attitude toward poetry, and that the third and fourth essays emphasize rather the writer's point of view.

J. E.

*Columbia University.*

*February, 1920.*





# **THE KINDS OF POETRY**



# THE KINDS OF POETRY

## I

THE many attempts in the last quarter-century to describe or define literary *genres* have assumed in poetry some such evolution as can be demonstrated in geology or anatomy. Literary scholarship has chiefly taught itself to see in the drama a development from the religious rites of Greece or of the Middle Age, to hear in the lyric thin echoes of Lesbos or Provence, and to suspect behind these beginnings, as behind the Homeric epic, lost tracts of primitive poetry

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that reach to the earliest mutterings of the race. To this understanding of poetry and its career the anthropologists, beyond their intention, have been most friendly; their gatherings of folk-song from races or tribes all but incoherent, furnish oblique evidence for the scholar's guess after forgotten poetic origins, much as the surviving monkey witnesses to kindred aspects in our parentage. The study of the beginnings of poetry is now usually supposed to call for the same kind of deduction and induction from fossils and belated survivals as the study of the origin of the horse. Is it too presumptuous to suggest that in this whole drift of literary research there is confusion of ideas?

In the first place, you cannot follow the track of anything that changes until you have some minimum of definition or standard or guide to assure you that from

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change to change you are still following one thing, and not discovering something new. If this generalization is sweeping, at least it can hardly be disputed by the historians of literary *genres*, who have all in some measure assumed and acted upon it. But so far as literature is concerned it does not seem too sweeping. Before you can inquire into the lowliest phases of life you must assume, as a scientist, what every man instinctively feels, that life under all its appearances is one thing. To uncover the history of any kind of poetry, you must carry along with you an image, a definition, of what you would identify. Yet the lyric, the drama, the epic, are still after much discussion undefined, and students of literature are become so reconciled to the unscientific slipperiness of their terminology that they expect no one to mean any specific thing by

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“lyric” or “drama”; they merely try to discover, in each use of each term, the user’s idiosyncrasy, the unconscious mark of himself or his breeding. Or if they feel the need of taming this chaos, they put their hope in those histories of *genres*, already mentioned, which are supposed to describe if not to define. Yet until there is first a definition of what is eternally lyrical, eternally dramatic, how can we know the evolution of lyric or drama?

Such a definition—in the second place—is indispensable not merely to any logical inquiry into evolution, but much more to any fair statement of what men in general think poetry is. In our ordinary thought we conceive of poetry just as we conceive of life itself, as subject to no development whatever. Things either have existed or they have not; the utterances of the race, similarly, have been either poetry or not

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poetry. It is no contradiction of this view that what to one age seems poetic is often unpoetic to the next; for in every such case it is not the poetry but the language, the medium of it, which time has rendered obsolete. Nor does materialistic science present any obstacle to this instinctive selection of the eternal and universal in life and poetry. Indeed, the more materialistic our explanation of life and the more anatomical our account of poetry, the less importance will the evolution of either have in comparison with its permanent aspects. If consciousness is but a fortunate conjunction and behavior of atoms, how wonderful that the myriad different combinations of atoms should have a consciousness in common and should understand each other. If poetry is but an accident of syllables, a fortunate stirring of connotations, emotional and mental,

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how extraordinary that we should agree that some connotations are poetic and others not. To be sure, life and poetry do appear in degree and variations; but to say quantitatively that a man is barely alive or that a piece is almost poetry does not in the least affect the qualitative distinction we all make between living and dead, poetic and unpoetic.

Yet, though the evolutionary historian has not shared this view of poetry as an unchanging function of an unchanging life, it will not do to say, even to imply, that he has contributed nothing to our knowledge. He has only failed to add to our knowledge of poetry. He has made clearer some aspect of the form, the meter, the imagery—what in a large sense we may call the language—of poetry; and in this field his method is practicable, since language does undergo evolution, and its



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relation to poetry is only secondary though indispensable, like the relation of the body to life. To take a ready illustration, the accounts of the development of the drama are for the most part studies of the expression of drama—studies of language, in the large sense—of the number of actors, the shape of the stage, the conditions of presentation; or, more subtly, studies of theme, of reversals of fortune and combat with fate. In every such case the preliminary definition which determined the evolution was based not on the drama, but on the expression of it, or on its subject-matter. Drama is that which can be acted, postulates one historian, and then goes trailing the drama with this lantern, though perhaps he would not agree that everythingactable is dramatic. Tragedy, begins the more subtle scholar, taking his cue from Aristotle, is that kind

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of drama which deals with a tragic incident, a destructive or painful action, such as death or agony or wounds. Yet the Tale of Troy furnishes as apt subject-matter for the lyric or the epic as for the drama, of which the scholar told us tragedy is a kind. And even if he hedges himself round with all these postulates at once, and says that tragedy deals with such and such subject-matter and must be actable, we still can see how the Tale of Troy might be staged and yet turn out to be a lyric after all. The scholar has simply failed to put something in his definition that would make certain the dramatic quality of his tragedy. Illustrations from other kinds of poetry are as easily cited. He who traces a literary *genre* like the elegy, let us say, and determines what is an elegy by some metrical characteristic, is really chronicling the use of that meter

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—just as the scientist who would write the history of man by showing the evolution of his anatomy, really traces only the history of his anatomy. That language, the whole dress of poetry, is as necessary to it as the body is to the phenomenon of life, justifies any amount of study upon it, but it should not be confused with the study of poetry.

Even if poetry were subject to evolution, it would be wise to study it in its latest development. The significance of life is not in the lowest cell, but in the soul of the most spiritual man; and if we are interested in defining the oak, why turn our back upon it, to draw conclusions from an acorn? But it is time to distinguish between language, which has an evolutionary career, and poetry, which has not. The English tongue has evolved since Shakespeare's day, but poetry is just what it

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was. Kill off every horse in the world, and you destroy the species. Kill off every known and suspected poet, and there will be as many as ever after a generation or two. If the language were destroyed, ages would be needed to evolve another; but poetry, being a constant function of life, is rooted as it were perpendicularly in every moment of consciousness, and not horizontally, trailing back long feelers into mist-hidden swamps of primitiveness.

## II

It is the aim of this paper to see what progress can be made toward defining poetic *genres* by throwing overboard all idea of evolution and considering poetry as an invariable function of life. In one sense, all poetry is of one kind, and is easily described. Ordinarily the emotions

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aroused by experience are used up in the further process of living. The poet differs from his fellows only in the greater power of his emotions, in the greater imperativeness of his intuitions, whereby it is easier for him to express them in words than to consume them in life. The stimulus that enters the poet's nature and comes out as epical or dramatic or lyrical expression, enters equally the nature of ordinary man and is consumed in lyrical or epic or dramatic living. However theoretical or dogmatic this parallel may seem, in practice it is recognized by all men. A poet's temperament prescribes into which of the three *genres* his work shall fall; and similarly the temperament of average men prescribes whether they shall live in the present, or in the past, or in the future. In these three eternal ways of meeting experience, it is believed, are to be found the

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definitions of the lyric, the drama, and the epic. The qualities to which we give the names "lyrical," "dramatic," "epic," are no less normal and fundamental than these three apprehensions of life—as simply a present moment, or as a present moment in which the past is reaped, or as a present moment in which the future is promised.

We are accustomed to say that the lyric expresses emotion, with or without an admixture of intellectual content; the emotion is the essential. Emotion, however, is the nearest intimation we have of the present moment. A man may act, and not realize that he has done so until afterwards, but he cannot have an emotion until he feels it. Yet vivid as is the response to immediate experience in the lyric, it is also as transitory as time itself—the lyrical is the most evanescent atti-

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tude toward life; and as all feeling tends to subside after the exciting cause is removed, so the lyric is the representation of a changed and dying feeling. Because the emotion is involuntary, its career in the poet's spirit will be to a degree a revelation of his character, and in that revelation some glimpse of his past and future will be involved; but the emphasis will remain upon the sense of the present, and from this flow the lyrical qualities—the immediate emotion and its subsiding.

This transitory nature of feeling has troubled both poets and critics, as the passing of time troubles every meditative spirit, who would make eternal the high moments of life. In the lyric to fix the most fleeting emotion has seemed imperative, but how? Many a poet has been disposed to let the emotion subside into a broad generalized frame of mind—into a

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reflection or a prophecy—and so rescue a permanent lesson from the sinking mood. But whether this disposition tactfully insinuates itself, as in Wordsworth, or bluntly obtrudes, as in Longfellow, the suspicion grows upon the reader that it is a defect of art; the poet's reflection, or whatever else he gets from his emotion, is likely to be personal and peculiar—more and more so as time separates him from his audience, for ages differ in their conventional thoughts more than in their feelings.

Recognizing this difficulty, criticism has never agreed with the poets that the eternity of the lyric should be provided for in the end of it, in the more intellectual part; rather, theorists of literature have formulated a platitude that the lyric is great by virtue of elemental, universal emotion. This would seem to be, however, a reading



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of history into a prudent recipe for fame. Unless it is an affectation, the lyric renders an emotion truly felt, and this sincerity of intuition appears to be all that the poet can be expected to care about. So far as his fame is concerned, the greatness of his poem will depend upon the number of men who share his emotion. That he ought not to take thought overmuch, nor choose between emotions even if he could, seems proved by the very large number of lyrists who have come to their own through the belated sympathy of a new age, to which they would never have appealed had they consulted contemporary preferences in their emotions. And even if the lyric poet has missed fame by the singularity of his reactions to experience, his work is still recognized as lyrical if it have the attitude that responds to life always as a rapturous present moment.

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### III

In its unconscious revelation of character, every lyric suggests a momentum of previous conduct, choices made, habits formed; and to the extent of this implication of the past, a lyric is a kind of drama. The difference between them is only a shifting of emphasis. Every drama is in a high sense lyrical, for it must be imagined as happening in the present; and every character in it, supposed to be living in the present, is a lyrical character. But the emphasis of the whole is upon the past. That the drama is the exhibition of human will is true only so far as it exhibits a harvested past, character returning upon itself in the guise of fate; for if a person in a play should will something inconsistent with his known past, or if some trick of fortune should release him

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from his past, the play would not satisfy the dramatic sense. That situation is dramatic which brings men suddenly to account, and he who has the eye for drama sees in life a perpetual judgment day. It is not a matter of analysis, nor of training, but of temperament, and therefore the young Shakspeare, when he writes a sonnet-sequence, manages to write a drama, and later, when the structure of his plays seems premeditated or elaborated, the complexity can be accounted for by the dramatic sense through which he apprehends life. There are two plots in the *Merchant of Venice*; how clever Shakspeare was, say the commentators, to join both in one play. But given the character of Antonio, the merchant, and Shakspeare would have been forced to invent the equivalents of those two plots, if he had not laid hands on them. For An-

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tonio is a moody creature, extravagant in his generosity, careless and reckless in his prejudices. He is a contradiction of himself, and his life, viewed dramatically, must show the simultaneous reaping of his good and bad acts. His insulting bravado with Shylock gets him into danger, but his loan to Bassanio, the generosity bound up with the insult and the bravado, brings Portia to his aid; and when the two streams of fate balance, he becomes again what he was before—moody and contradictory.

To say that Shakspeare constructed this consistency is to forget that without such consistency one cannot conceive of life as the accomplishment of the past. The secret of this harmony of form is not in Shakspeare's craft, but in his intuition. Nor need we attribute to the Greek dramatist any particular theory of hered-

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ity, if in the *Œdipus* story the past that is reaped extends over two generations. His parents grasped at opportunity at all costs, and *Œdipus* inherits their impulsiveness, their inability to consider. To be sure he is indifferent to the identity of the old man he killed on the highway, and he risks his life to share the throne of a queen whom he does not know and has never seen. But only his father would so forget his royalty as to quarrel on the highway with a young vagabond, and only his mother would promise herself indifferently to whoever should answer the Sphinx. It is the same character in all three, and the fault is alike ruinous to all.

The fact that all three characters submit, as it were, to the same judgment day and are punished for the same fault, suggests the observation in passing, that the dramatic point of view tends to unify life

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at any given moment by discovering in it a homogeneous past. Just as the student of anatomy sees the passers-by as skeletons, and as the journalist who investigates graft comes to attribute every defect of government to speculation, so the dramatist, studying the past as reaped by one person in his play, is likely to attribute a similar past to other characters. This duplication of theme is so familiar as hardly to need illustration. *Twelfth Night*, a love story, shows all its characters except the clown to be in some stage of love; *Measure for Measure*, similarly, exhibits the degrees of the fear of death in various natures; and *King Lear* studies life as a problem of filial relations. The significant thing is that this economy of situation and theme is not a matter of choice or craft with the dramatist, any more than the observation of men as skele-

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tons is economy of point of view with the anatomist; it lies rather in the method or means of perception—in the dissective eye, and in the dramatic sense.

The immediate effect, however, of any play read or seen, is less logical, less rigidly consistent, because of the lyrical element—the emphasis of the present moment in all the characters. If the story is to be of value as proving the past, the persons must all speak and act conscious only of the present, without suspicion that they are terms in a demonstration. That is, they must act and speak lyrically. Each present moment, as it passes through the reader's or the spectator's mind, will be interesting in proportion to its emotional intensity, which is furnished partly by the lines, partly by the acting, partly by the situation. These all are lyrical elements. Situation has nothing to do with the dra-

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matic sense, except as it affords character an opportunity to display itself; it looks to the present, and sometimes to the future, but never to the past. How unconscious of the past the acting must be, has just been suggested. The lines may be very lyrical, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, without much glancing at the dramatic drift, or they may be capable of a double meaning, lyrical to the speaker and dramatic to his hearers, as in *Macbeth*.

The kind of character or emotion revealed in the lyric, we saw, has been thought to have a bearing upon its probable fame. It is obvious, however, that drama may be judged either by the kind of emotion, the kind of character exhibited—from the standpoint of the actor—or by the extent to which the reaping of the past is felt. It is a common enough phenomenon of stage history that the popular



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favor often leaps to the lyrical side, and many a play dramatically bad succeeds because it contains some character lyrically good. But if the play gives a strong enough sense of the past, that is, if the characters are consistent with their own history, they may be lyrically what they please; they must in that case appeal less upon the virtue of their emotions than upon the justice of their fate. An audience will permit the lyric to express only such emotions as they at the moment understand, but in the drama they will accept the emotion tentatively until they see what is to become of it. Satan cursing God in a lyric will not please the pious, who yet would be delighted to see him in a drama cursing God and getting punished for it.

The drama has one other lyrical effect, in the general emotional tone it conveys.

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This tone is serious in proportion as the work is felt to be a reaping of the past; every judgment day is serious, even if we are acquitted. Therefore there is no clear line to be drawn between tragedy and comedy, for different men and different ages will disagree as to what is serious; nor is there any essential difference between tragedy and comedy, since a mere change of opinion as to what is serious so easily converts one into the other. The occasion of laughter or merriment in the play is from the lyrical part—from the speech or the situation or the acting—and we enjoy it for the passing moment; but every comedy which is really dramatic becomes serious with time, as men more highly value the sacredness of human nature. Beatrice and Benedick amuse us while they are joking or while others trick them, and Petruchio's behavior at his wed-

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ding is funny while we hear of it, but in so far as we care about those characters, such episodes grieve our sense of the dignity of life. The difference, then, that at first sight appears between comedy and tragedy depends upon nothing but whether we care so little for the characters that laughter is adequate armor against the judgments they unconsciously pronounce upon themselves, or whether we require a nobler kind of fortitude.

### IV

The lyric is closer to the drama than to the epic, and there are fewer epics than either lyrics or dramas. The reason is probably that a sense of the future—the ability to see life as a prospect of destiny—is far rarer than a sense of the past, to say nothing of the immediate sense of the

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present, and it seems to have always something of the miraculous in it. If each moment can be seen as a harvest of previous moments, there is every logical reason why the interest of the present should be the future it promises; but only men of unusual faith have risen to this logic, and even they felt the promise of destiny more as a gift from a superior being than as a consequence of the present. Indeed, where the promise reveals itself to a nature of great optimism, it often takes the form of strong contrast with things as they are, and the lyrical and the epical moods in the poem are almost miraculously contradictory. *Æneas* is humanly weak, his expedition but a frail band to make certain the destiny of Rome; the poet intends us to set the lyrical mood of the hero—regret, reluctance, even terror—over against the majesty of the imperial doom he served.

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It is a contrast, not a consequence; or if a consequence, then too much a thing of wonder for the logic of normal man.

A more superficial reason has usually been given for the small number of epics in literature, especially for the total disappearance of the *genre* in modern times. It is said that every epic must have a plot in heaven, working itself out in human fortunes on earth, because the epic exhibits divine will, as the drama exhibits the will of man; and since we no longer have a well-peopled anthropomorphic heaven, we can no longer show the gods plotting there. But to say that the epic exhibits divine will is only to say that it gives the sense of destiny, the feeling of guidance to an end. Why cannot men express such a feeling without a scene on Olympus? The gods and goddesses of the old epics were but part of the language with which the epic

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feeling was expressed; they are no more essential to the rendering of that sense than the kings and queens of the old plays are essential to the drama. If only we had an epic to express, we could make the language for it. But, say the historians, the epic has always dealt with a world crisis, involving a higher and a lower civilization; how can we have this large kind of poetry again until we have another great crisis? If the historian be American, he often concludes by wondering why the Civil War, so easily comparable to that of Troy, never found its Homer. Yet these explanations, and the description of the epic implied in them, are not sufficiently searching. The world crisis which is clear enough now in the *Æneid* was probably not clear until Virgil made it so, and whether he believed in the mythology and the heaven he wrote of, made no difference

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poetically to him, and makes none to us. The essence of the epic is that attitude toward life which sees in the moment a destined future. This attitude in no sense is conditioned by acquaintance with Greek theology, nor by use of classical hexameters, nor by division into a certain number of books, nor by any other accident of form. It may invest itself with each or all of these circumstances, but they are not essential to it. The epic attitude in *Don Quixote*, without aid of gods in a heavenly plot, exhibits itself in that pathetic brooding upon the destiny of Spain of which the great novel is eloquent. The epic attitude in the *Song of Roland* is likewise not a matter of celestial furniture, nor of Greek or Roman verse, but a matter, as Gaston Paris said, of love for an idealized France, for the country which seemed the appointed champion-in-arms of Christen-

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dom. The epic attitude in the work of Victor Hugo, another but a similar idealization of France, is not completely expressed in one of his writings, but diffused through all of them. That the Don should be shipwrecked by the actual facts of life, or that Roland should be slain by the Saracens, diminishes as little from the sense of destiny as that Aeneas should sometimes be frightened. The *Aeneid* and the *Song of Roland* and *Don Quixote* are the work of men who conceived of their race as serving a prospect of fate. Without this attitude no epic is possible.

If literature is now comparatively barren of this kind of poetry, may it not be because this age, in spite of much theorizing, has no confidence as to what its destiny may be? It is not that we have lost the gods. If we no longer have Milton's celestial personages and geography, we



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have the idea of evolution, which ought to give the strongest possible conviction of our future. But evolution, whether in the hands of the literary historian or in those of the scientist, has been exclusively occupied in clarifying and reinforcing our sense of the past; it has not even suggested whither we are bound. No wonder that its chief service has been to the drama, which with a new, scientific confidence now shows us the inevitability of one moment upon the next, the sins of the fathers visited mathematically upon the children; no wonder that with this rejuvenated day of judgment perpetually before us, our drama is dark and tragic, and deals, however wholesomely, with our worse selves. The beast we were, constantly returns to bear witness against the man we think we are.

Exactly what sort of epic we shall have

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when science becomes once more prospective and hopeful it is hardly worth while to guess, but the permanent traits of the *genre* are fairly clear. Just as the lyric enters into the drama, so the drama enters into epic; for a sense of destiny involves some guidance out of the past and the present, the direction of to-morrow being found as it were by the two points of to-day and yesterday. To the ancient mind all this meant simply the will of the gods, within such limits as the gods were free; therefore a drama was enacted in heaven reaping the past of the divinities, and that harvest became on earth man's fate. To state it another way, man would be most devout, most ready to attribute his future to the past of the gods, at those moments of history when he felt himself in a world-current of destiny. Tasso and Milton felt such prophetic influences, though they sub-

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stituted the Christian heaven and divinities for the pagan. And however the future poet creates new imagery or modifies the old, he will keep unchanged the soul of the epic—the prospect of the race; and in this prospect will remain, if only in a diffused state, a dramatic consciousness of the past from which it grew.

The lyric also enters into the epic, not only as it is included in the heavenly drama, but throughout the poem—most obviously in the character of the hero, upon whom the will of the gods falls. Here again the poem may be judged by the lyric impression—by the behavior of the hero. Such a standard, however, leaves us disappointed with most epics. For it is to the poet's advantage to minimize the strength of the hero and magnify his obedience, in order that the power of destiny on him may seem irresistible;

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otherwise the poet may find he has written not epic but drama. It is best rather to judge a poem by the quality that distinguishes its *genre*. The test of the epic attitude is in the consistency of its sense of an inexorable future—which is quite apart from its lyrical excellences.

Finally, the epic, like the drama, has a total lyric aspect, as naturally hopeful as the sense of the past is naturally serious. No matter how somber the incidents or the situation, they are in the epic but opportunities for the display of destiny; every moment promises a new beginning. For an epic to be pessimistic is a paradox, and indicates a confusion in the poet's view of life.

## V

If these definitions of the kinds of poetry

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are just, they would seem to open for the student of literature, if he so desires, a new field besides that of language in which to apply the principle of evolution. The changes that can be traced in literary history are changes not of poetry nor of its kinds, but of the spiritual ideals, the social conventions and proprieties, the political conditions, which at any given time are as it were the raw material of literature; and in this material some principle of evolution may perhaps be found. For example, the history of English drama, if drama is the sense of the past called to judgment, should study the changes in the English conception of what is a test of character. The Elizabethan stage dealt with situations of great adventure—with murders, shipwrecks, plots, and surprises; whereas the modern play usually prefers a test of character taken from an ordered,

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quiet life. Evidently there has been a change in the English ideal of success and failure. It will not do to assume that the nature of drama has changed, nor even that the process of time has made the modern play more dramatic; *Lear* and *Macbeth* and *Othello* hold their own by any definitions. But it is illuminating to remember that the successful man, in the Renaissance ideal, was one who could cope with every public or private emergency. It was not enough that he should be morally good—a beggar might be that; but he—and the women as well—must have the varied efficiency of gentlefolk born to a career. Viola, Portia, Orlando meet emergencies with success; Hamlet and Othello do not. The modern playwright, however, would be most unlikely to represent any of these excellent persons as tragic victims, because the modern ideal

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of success is a matter of living, as it were, on the defensive, not by rising to extraordinary accomplishment, but by avoiding such errors as later may embarrass us; our typical tragedy shows some weakness overtaking us in the very routine of our existence. Between this idea of failure and the Elizabethan, there is a change that cannot be understood without the historian's help; and there are similar changes, calling for similar help, in the crude material that has gone into lyrics and epics. If the study of these changes is not specifically the study of poetry, at least it is the study of man's way of accounting for himself to himself—not an ignoble study; and its effect would be to show the roots of poetry in life, by illuminating man's eternal effort to restate life so that it will satisfy him, and the eternal moods through which the eternal effort is made.





**THE TEACHING OF  
POETRY**



## THE TEACHING OF POETRY

### I

**I**F we are teachers of poetry, it is the love of poetry, one may suppose, that made us so. At some critical moment of childhood or youth we may have taken down from the shelves of the library at home what seemed a chance volume—but it was our fate in our hands. We opened at random at that sparse distribution of type down the center of the page which we knew signified verse. What good angel bade us read? A cadence, an image, a line—and poetry was born in us, the singing heart, the divine homesickness and

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the growing wings, the enchanted madness, sudden and beautiful and incurable beyond other kinds of falling in love.

For me poetry began with three and a half lines from the *Idyls of the King*. So vivid was the experience that I still see just where the words stood on the page, and just how the afternoon sun streamed through the window, and how the old green-bound copy of Tennyson was transformed as I read—

“Long stood Sir Bedivere  
Revolving many memories, till the hull  
Looked one black dot against the verge of dawn,  
And on the mere the wailing died away.”

My father came into the room, I remember, and I read out the lines to him. He agreed that they were admirable, but to my surprise he did not find them momentous.

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Or if no verses awakened us, perhaps some heaven-sent teacher brought to mind our heritage in Tennyson or Shelley, in Wordsworth or Milton, in Keats or Spenser; heaven-sent he seems to us now, though his pedagogy was nothing more than drawing aside the forgetfulness that veiled our better selves from us, and his "insights," as we called them, into the masters were but naming over the things we too in a groping way liked best. He did not introduce, he restored us, to poetry. And other beginnings in poetry—secondary beginnings, they might be called—we owe to teachers of literature in school and college, whose chance or intended allusions to vital things in books and to ideal things in life lighted up beauty by the way. To give a list of such allusions would furnish no clue to their importance, for even at the time they seemed casual, and memory

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holds them without much contact or relation to each other; but they made poetry more intelligible and more lovable. I think, for example, of a lecture in my freshman year in which a comparison was made between Lowell and Matthew Arnold. One poet-critic, I forget which, was the subject of the lecture, and the other was brought in, perhaps on the moment's inspiration, for a natural contrast between English and American contemporaries; but it was the contrast, however incidental, that won my affection for both writers. I think also of a lecture on Shelley and one on Milton, in which the splendid reading of well-chosen passages made the poets live. Such moments of dawn or starlight never cease altogether for the poetry lover, though the glamour is on the earliest. Gratitude prefers not to discriminate among them. Should I be more

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grateful to that Lowell-Arnold talk, which came first, or to some wonderful lectures on Virgil, which I can hardly expect to hear bettered? Did I gain more from reading those lines in the *Passing of Arthur*, which were for me the doorway to poetry, or from reading Plato's *Symposium*, which was the house itself?

The desire to teach poetry then, as I understand it, is the desire to provide others with just such new-births into the world of imagination as we have received from books and from instructors. Teaching poetry, in this sense, is not teaching meter or verse forms, nor even teaching the subject-matter of poems; it is the multiplying of those fortunate moments when the soul is dilated and the universe enlarged. We may conclude that graduate students have in mind a failure to provide such moments for them when they com-

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plain, as they sometimes do, that the course leading to the doctorate does not lead them to poetry.

But when we start out to teach poetry in our own enlightened way, we soon fall into a suspicion that it cannot be taught at all. We begin with an exuberant purpose to reproduce our good fortune in the lives of others, to give them the books that helped us, and to imitate for their benefit the inspiring insights of our masters; but somehow the magic illusion does not get created. We call the attention of our students to the passage from Tennyson which first was poetry to us, but our students see nothing in it but Tennyson; and as for imitating our former teachers, even our colleagues look at us with pity when we try to explain the secrets of the priceless instruction we once sat under. In a dark moment we recall that many of our class-



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mates came away from that lecture on Lowell-Arnold, or from that on Virgil, untouched by any gleam. These ministrations, we come to fear, are like other service of the spirit, too personal, too much indebted to the place and the hour, for any one to make them his profession. We may in a sense teach literature, but not poetry, we fear. We may lecture on the contributing circumstances of literary production, on the language, on the lives of the authors; but for poetry, we fear, for the spark from heaven, the student like the scholar gypsy must wait, and we half believe with the scholar gypsy that he had better wait outside our class.

We are not likely to agree on any advice for teaching poetry until we have disposed of this primary discouragement. Yet though the discouragement is so general, we ought to dispose of it easily. For

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we know there are many successful teachers of poetry; almost every college has one at some time or other—usually all the time. Though most of us found our first love of poetry in a book, it was probably an inspiring teacher who gave us our second love of it, and sent us to the university. If only a rare man could be found whose pupils became poetry lovers, we might well call him a genius, and give up hope; but since there are a number of such teachers, why should we think their equipment or their success beyond our imitation? The cause of our discouragement is that we try to reproduce for our students the exact conditions of our own initiation; we would have them admire the same passages in the same poems, and we even attempt to repeat the mannerisms and the very words of our teachers. But allowing for every variation of temperament in

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teachers and students, and for the accidents of time and of locality, we may yet hope to teach poetry without a too terrifying dependence on the spark from heaven. To a certain extent we may even cultivate those apparently magical insights into literature. Very simply, we may observe and imitate what the successful teachers of poetry have in common. What is their purpose in teaching poetry? What peculiarities are discoverable in their equipment?

## II

The office of the teacher of poetry is easily defined; it is to afford a mediation between great poets and their audience. For the most part the poets addressed themselves to their contemporaries without suspecting they would ever need in-

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terpretation. Certain youthful ones, like the Spenser of the *Shepherd's Calendar*, may have annotated their works in advance, but there is no evidence that even they looked forward with pleasure to being lectured on by college professors. Yet even for the most direct poets time has gradually obscured the meaning, by changing the language or by dropping out some of the environment which made the book pertinent. With every year a gulf widens between the book and its reader. The office of the teacher of literature, then, is to supply the information, the background, whatever is lacking to make the reader at home with the book.

But if we are to explain any of the past, we shall need to know all of it, at least as much as possible; we must draw on more than one kind of record, on history and philosophy as well as on fiction and

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imaginative writing. Perhaps even so we shall not be able to recover the past; but if the whole record is not sufficient, a part of it certainly will not be. It is no accident that the successful teachers of literature have usually been students of philosophy or of history or of both, and if we wish to imitate them, our first step must be to broaden our definition of literature until it includes not only poetry and the novel, essays and drama, but also the masterpieces of biography and other forms of history, of philosophy, and of science. If such a counsel of indiscrimination is surprising, we should observe that here is no advice to teach history or to teach philosophy; it may be plain in a moment that such services are quite distinct from teaching poetry. The advice is rather to consider all masterpieces of expression as literature, as poetry if you wish—capable

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of giving us that new birth of the imagination which we defined as the experience of poetry—whether they happen to deal with an emotional dream, or with the annals of a nation, or with abstract enquiry. If even in this form the advice is puzzling, it is so only because we are students of English literature. We inherit the unenviable distinction of having put poetry off into a corner, and of treating with contempt those other and inseparable records on which poetry often depends. No such advice would surprise us were we students of Greek letters, nor would the advice be needed; for the classical scholar, so far as I know, has never omitted Aristotle or Plato or Thucydides or Herodotus from his canon of literature, any more than the French student has omitted Descartes or Rousseau or Voltaire. Both the classical and the French students, therefore, have

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the advantage of studying, along with poetry, a body of facts and a body of ideas which often determine the inspiration of poems. In teaching English we do sometimes talk of the ideas of evolution in *In Memoriam*, but we ignore those predecessors of Darwin whom Tennyson studied, and Darwin himself, of course, we do not read. If it be urged that he did not write with felicity, and therefore deserves to be counted out of literature, what shall be said of Hobbes and Locke, of Berkeley and Hume, or how shall we dispose of such an historian as Gibbon? The offerings in college courses would indicate that these writers are none of them considered germane to the study of literature, not to say the study of poetry.

The narrow definition of poetry which excludes prose, and the narrow definition of literature which excludes history and

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philosophy, are in a sense novelties with us. When Sidney defended poetry, he understood within the term the parables of Christ and the dialogues of Plato; of verse writing by itself he said little. When Milton wrote of his ambition to be a poet, it was metrical composition that he had in mind, but his definition did not preclude the most austere of philosophic subjects. Shelley in his beautiful essay, itself a poem, resumed Sidney's large outlook, and wrote of poetry as of a way of apprehending all phases of life, even in prose. We may say broadly that the sixteenth, the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries in England defined poetry as the French or the classical reader would define it, and that even in the nineteenth century large-natured critics who had the best of their training from the century before, took this just view of literature. But with



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the romantic movement came an emphasis upon feeling as opposed to thought, and therefore on the literature of the emotions as opposed to the literature of reason. To the exponents of this school it does not seem to have occurred that reason can itself be the object of passion, or the cause of it; on the contrary, the mathematical conceptions of a Newton were relegated by the new literary taste to the limbo of "cold thought," whereas a primrose by a river's brim became the occasion for poetic temperature and the summons to poetic meditation.

The formal doctrine that only those books are literature which have to do somewhat exclusively with the emotions, was set forth in De Quincey's half forgotten yet too typical letter on the literature of knowledge and the literature of power. Knowledge was once thought to be power,

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but De Quincey did not think so. "The antithesis of literature," he says, "is books of knowledge. . . . All that is literature seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature, to communicate knowledge." What does he mean by power? Power is the awakening in us of emotional aptitudes or forces which we were not previously aware of—a definition wide enough to be harmless, except that the romanticist could not imagine his heart so fluttered by an accession of knowledge. "If it be asked," he says, "what is meant by communicating power, I in my turn would ask by what name a man would designate the case in which I should be made to feel vividly, and with a vital consciousness, emotions which ordinary life rarely or never supplies occasion for exciting, and which had previously lain unawakened and hardly within the dawn of

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consciousness.” Those books, then, which stir the emotion and dilate the imagination—books like *The English Mail Coach*—belong to literature; whereas books like Gibbon’s history, since they supply us with knowledge rather than with emotion, are not literature, but the antithesis of it.

It is hardly worth the time to argue with De Quincey, who nowadays has become the mere shell of an author, a stylistic ghost. His theory in itself might even be considered unobjectionable, so long as it is not applied to any particular book. But unfortunately his point of view has prevailed, to the harm of our teaching of literature. In many colleges to this day the formula survives that the nineteenth century was a well of true poetry, whereas the eighteenth century was an arid discipline of rhetoric—that the English imagination slept fitfully through a nightmare

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of suffocation in Dryden, Pope and Gray, and awoke with deep breaths of gratitude for being alive in Wordsworth and Coleridge, even in Leigh Hunt. The eighteenth century has become a mystic term of reproach, which like some other mystic things, will not bear looking into. If we are thoroughgoing romanticists we remove from the century any writers who do not illustrate our conception of it. "The eighteenth century," we say "was a period of rhetoric and cold facts, wherein poetry and imagination were dead. William Collins, however, Chatterton, Blake, Burns, Thomson, and Cowper, really belong to the nineteenth century; it is only by an accident that they lived in the eighteenth. It is only by an accident also that Addison's discussion of *Paradise Lost* and Warton's *Observations on the Faerie Queene* appeared when they did. We

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know this is so, because the eighteenth century did not care for imaginative poetry." If we are fond of Wordsworth, it is with reluctance that we admit he owed something to Pope. If we admit any merit in Pope, we probably concede it to *The Rape of the Lock*, a poem which could have taught Wordsworth little; but we balk at the *Essay on Man*, though it is not more didactic than *The Excursion*, and certainly is clearer and shorter. We may be persuaded to approve even the *Essay on Man*, but beyond this we absolutely will not go; here we take our stand on the last perilous edge of literature; we will not drop into the chasm of knowledge. The invitation comes to us in the suggestion that for the ideas of his essay Pope drew on Shaftesbury and Bolingbroke, and indirectly on Leibnitz; and to read those gentlemen might help us to understand

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the essay. But why understand it any better? We reflect that we are far enough away from poetry as it is.

Perhaps it is time for me to say that I hold no special brief for Pope nor for the eighteenth century, nor do I fail to admire the greatness of the romantic poets. What the lover of poetry must hold a brief for is the truth that each generation gets its poetic thrill out of slightly different images and suggestions, and it is impertinent for any age to conclude that its particular way of enjoying poetry is the only right one. If I found poetry first in a bit of romantic suggestion in Tennyson, naturally I am not the less grateful to the romantic method. But other people have made their discovery of poetry in such lines of Pope's as,

"Act well your part; there all the honor lies,"

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or even in passages still more practical and informing. If we are to teach all of poetry rather than some particular school, we must recognize that those insights, those enlarged moments of the soul, which we agreed it is the object of poetry to impart, can be found by different readers in different authors. With that variety of taste it would be useless as well as impertinent to interfere. Falling in love, in poetry as elsewhere, is an invariable experience, universally understood; but as to the object which caused the excitement, there is no need to agree.

On this general ground we might well plead that the more intellectual kinds of writing should be restored to our definition of poetry. But there is also a special reason, which even the most romantic teachers of poetry now admit. The tendency to neglect as unpoetic all writers

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who are given to vigorous intellectual processes, who really think, and to praise exclusively those who appeal to our emotions, has largely destroyed the ability to read. A serious poet to-day, with an idea as well as an emotion, faces a hospitable but an incapacitated audience. It has become almost an unfair question to ask poetry lovers just what their favorite poems mean, for poetry, by romantic definition and by assiduous practice, has become an emotional experience without coherent meaning. The ill effects of such a definition have been progressive. Those who refused to grapple with the not very profound argument of Pope soon found it inconvenient to follow the argument in Wordsworth or in Tennyson or in Browning. A few years ago a stand was made against this increasing reluctance to know what poetry specifically means, and now



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a wholesome reaction is well started, but for the moment there was much bandying about of the phrase "teaching ideas in literature," as though to stress ideas were to inject into literature a foreign or novel element. All that the phrase actually stood for was a return of the sane conviction that, provided one cares deeply for the things of the intellect, ideas are proper subjects for emotion and therefore for poetry, and that those writers who express intelligible ideas should be intelligently appreciated, over and above whatever emotional power their art may afford. The reaction is now so far advanced that we need not forfeit our reputation as lovers of poetry if we insist on knowing just what Shelley means in certain portions, let us say, of the *Prometheus Unbound*, or of the *Epipsychidion*; nor are we lost if we conclude that Shelley did not always

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know what he meant. We need not be deaf to his superb music; we need not deny that for those moods which are satisfied by pure music he is always adequate; nor need we be blind to the noble intellectual designs that usually do clarify his profuse emotion. We need but discriminate honestly between his merits and his shortcomings, between his moments of thought and his moments of uncontrolled feeling; so shall we deserve the confidence of those willing students who try to like him, since he is a famous poet, but who cannot see at all times what his poetry is about.

### III

'As soon as we have convinced ourselves that our definition of literature should include history and philosophy, there is dan-

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ger that we may become teachers of history or teachers of philosophy, rather than teachers of literature. We are most likely to become historians. There is of course no objection to teaching history; the only question is whether by so doing we are not departing from our first ambition to confer on others our love of poetry. We should observe that the teaching of literature as history differs radically from the use of history to understand literature. It is true, of course, that poetry is a record of thoughts and feelings, and that we may try, if we wish, to trace the development of culture in English poetry from Beowulf to Blake. But there are grave difficulties in the way, and even if the performance were easy, there would be nothing in it to make one necessarily a lover of poetry, any more than Gibbon's masterly summarizing of theological creeds

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would make converts to them. And even from the historical point of view, poetry is dangerous material from which to recover the visage of the past. In proportion to the completeness with which it reflects life, it is a mirror for every age to see itself in, but we do not look into mirrors to see the person who was there before us. The great poets capture a whole field of vision, though focusing on only a part of it; we can find in the picture, as we can find in life, many details that never interested them. In this inclusiveness the poet, unlike the philosopher or the historian, is often more profound than he intended to be. Reflecting on this fact, we may be chary of ascribing to any poet, or to his age, the things in his works that are precious to us. Nothing in recent years, for example, has probably been more satisfying to lovers of poetry than

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the revival of interest in Euripides among English readers—a revival brought about largely by the genius and the enthusiasm of Professor Gilbert Murray. But along with this appreciation of the noble poetry, perhaps finally to undermine that appreciation, if we only knew, has gone much emphasis upon the modern note in Euripides—upon his foreknowledge, as it were, of the problems that distress our age. Beyond question it is possible to quote from him passages strangely apposite to contemporary themes, yet it does not follow that he had any more understanding of our times than other poets equally great, or that his message is more intimate for us than it was for men a hundred years ago. It is Professor Murray who belongs to our age; to say that Euripides is modern may well be only an awkward and misleading way of registering his immortality,

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his capacity for being interpreted to any age. Though we can find our thoughts expressed in him, we hardly need to revise our notion of the Greeks, so as to attribute our thoughts to them. In some cases the contemporary note is palpable luck. When the old nurse, trying to persuade Hippolytus to love Phaedra, remarks that Aphrodite is a beautiful goddess, universally worshipped among men, the youth, who is devoted to Artemis, answers that what god one worships is a matter of taste. Does the reply sound sophisticated, disillusioned? Perhaps it is so to readers at least tentatively monotheistic, but nothing could be more sensibly pious on the lips of a youth like Hippolytus, who had a number of gods to choose from.

If poetry has the faculty of reflecting various meanings, of expressing the reader quite as much as it expresses the writer,

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### I

and if for that reason it is dangerous material with which to teach history, for the same reason it is an unsafe vehicle for the teaching of philosophy. Here also we should observe that the teaching of literature as philosophy differs radically from the use of philosophy to understand literature. When we would appreciate the *Essay on Man*, there is an advantage in knowing Shaftesbury and Bolingbroke, just as there is an advantage in knowing the early theories of evolution when we would read *In Memoriam*; if it was an idea that stirred the poet's emotion, perhaps we must understand the idea before the same emotion will be stirred in us. But there is a world of difference between emotional contact with an idea and philosophic control of it. Certain ideas, the denial of the old-fashioned kind of immortality, for example, produced a mo-

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mentous effect on Tennyson, leaving him perplexed and wrought; in time he got used to his perplexities, without solving any of them, and he had the genius to give us a faithful record of his doubts, just as they beset him, and a faithful record of his getting used to them. There may be a philosophy in the writers he had been reading, who produced this effect upon him, but there is no philosophy in *In Memoriam*, no system of thought, only a series of emotional reactions to ideas. Those indefatigable commentators who still approach the poem in the faith that Tennyson, being a good poet, ought to have a sound theology, are sore put to it to furnish him out of their own philosophies with even a patched-up and dubitable system. Desiring to get a precise translation of what the poet by his own account only vaguely felt, they must wrangle for-



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ever as to just what was intended by "Strong son of God, immortal love," at one end of the poem, or by "One far off divine event," at the other. The question would be a fair one to ask of a philosopher, but it is an unfair one to ask of a poet who for the moment records not ideas but the distress produced by them. Even when the poet is intentionally philosophical, as Pope is in his Essay, or—to take a great example at once—as Lucretius is in his epic of nature, there is something more permanent in him than the philosophy; there is what we call poetry, that kindling of the heart and the imagination which philosophy may be the cause of, but which is not philosophy. It is to this that we first gave our devotion, and it is this we desire to teach.

We cannot make the distinction too clear. Instead of teaching poetry as

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though it were history or as though it were philosophy, we need to draw on history and philosophy in order to understand poetry. History is a large word. It means all that is necessary for us to know before we can be contemporary with a poem. To read Chaucer with every advantage, we must recover as far as possible the frame of mind which the men of his time brought to their acquaintance with his work. We must know their language, their political, social and other opinions, their attitude toward life and toward poetry in general, and their prejudice for or against the poet. All the scholarship needed for this recovery of Chaucer's time may be conceived of as history, whether it involves learning biographical facts or learning a language. Study of this kind is the only magic to change us into a contemporary of any remote writer, if that be

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at all possible. We often think the change costs more than it is worth; we are especially rebellious when a language has to be mastered, merely to read a poet whom we may not care for, after all. So unpopular has language study become, that the entire moral responsibility for it will shortly rest on heartless graduate faculties. But this ought not to surprise us in an era when it has been considered no handicap to a reader not to know just what his favorite poet means. For many of us, of course, philology in the narrow sense may never prove alluring; at most it may be for us only a limited approach to poetry. But some knowledge of language is obligatory if we are to make any comparative study of literature, whether we compare the poets of our own race in different centuries, or the poets of different races in our own time; and we would prob-

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ably admit that without some comparison of poetry the teaching of it can hardly get far. The summons to be contemporary, to study the poetry of our own time and our own country, is a gallant encouragement to be self-reliant, to stand on our feet, as Emerson and Whitman invited us to do. Besides, the invitation excuses us from learning Anglo-Saxon, or German, or French, or Latin or Greek. Yet what an unimaginative love of poetry that would be, which could be satisfied to rest on one time or in one place! Whoever got his first love of poetry from a strictly contemporary poem? It was the quickening of imagination in us that made the experience poetic, and imagination rarely gets its first quickening from what is close at hand. Whether we read back into time, or crosswise into foreign literature of our own day, some arduous study of language,

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of all that we have called history, and some effort of imagination, must be undertaken before we are neighbor to the poet whose works we hope to understand.

If the historical approach to literature is unpopular, perhaps the teachers of literature are themselves to blame. It is so easy to teach history instead of poetry; it is so natural to assume that these historical matters on which we spend so much study have to do, not only with the approach to poetry, but also with poetry itself. The whole service of history, however, is but to make us contemporary with the author. Once become contemporary, we are in no better position than any other readers who are about to make the acquaintance of a new poem. When we are finally at home in Chaucer's age, we face there the same problems of appreciation and criticism as we face when we read

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verse in the morning paper. Does the poem thrill us? Why? Is it a good poem? Why? The study of history merely postpones these elementary questions; it never can answer them. The fact that Chaucer derived his plots from Boccaccio or from some one else, and the fact that his language evolved largely from the Anglo-Saxon or is recruited from the French, can have no bearing on the value of his work as poetry. No matter how far scholarship retreats into history, it is still backing away from those simple questions that baffled the critics of *Fannie's First Play*.

The young lover of poetry, recalling that he found his most beautiful experience in some lines the author and date of which he perhaps did not know, is naturally wary of the unconscious tendency to substitute historical information for liter-

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ary insight. He observes that the purely historical approach is helpless in dealing with a poem just written—worse than helpless, for it often tries to operate blithely where there is no history. I once heard a great philologist tell a young poet that his lyric just published in a magazine was one of the most admirable poems in American literature. The happy author asked wherein this excellence had been noticed, and the scholar replied with enthusiasm that every word in the lyric was of Anglo-Saxon origin. I still see the look on the poet's face. Only a few months ago we were reading a description of a well known school of English teaching. The description was seriously intended and entirely laudatory; it set forth an ideal. "In its literary studies," we read, this school "aims to get at the bottom of things, to explain relations, to trace an author in

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his borrowings, to lay bare the influence under which he wrote. To mere esthetic evaluation it turns a deaf ear." In other words, the merit of this way of teaching literature is that it attends exclusively to the historical approach, and resolutely declines to consider what the poet and his readers are primarily interested in—the effect produced by the poem itself. It is a natural and fortunate instinct of the student, who still remembers his genuine contacts with poetry, to protect himself against this theory of teaching. Unhappily the student often protects himself too much, failing to see the immense importance of historical investigation properly employed, as a means of becoming contemporary with old poets.

When the historian stands helpless at last before the poem itself, the philosopher comes to his rescue. To criticize a poem



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written yesterday or this morning, one needs not a record but a theory of life. We pass judgment immediately on our neighbor's actions, on his thoughts and emotions, without going into his biography. An account of his life might indeed affect our opinion of his morals or his motives, but his acts themselves we judge by our own scale of values. Poetry, a reflection of action or thought or feeling, is judged in no other way. The equipment of the best teachers of literature is principally this, that by experience or study they have arrived at a coherent philosophy of life, and have therefore an instrument with which to take hold of new emotions and new thoughts. It makes little difference what our philosophy is, so long as it is sincere and thorough; of course, the more it explains of life and letters, the better it is, but the desirable thing

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is to have some philosophy. If we can organize our teaching of literature so that our students will come in contact with historical and philosophical masterpieces, we may hope that they will feel not too far estranged from the atmosphere that surrounds the older poets, and that, once become contemporary with those poets, they will formulate a consistent chart of life by which to orient themselves in all poetry, even in that written to-day.

### IV

The service that philosophy renders in giving insights into poetry is so simple that it needs no elaborate illustration. Yet I should like to suggest one or two examples, if for no other reason than because I have come to believe that the magical "insights" we admired in our former teachers can be acquired by anyone

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who will first get, what they had, a sound philosophy. We shall probably derive little help from the usual books on esthetics, though it is to them that the literary man would naturally turn; rather we may expect to find inspiration in those discussions which are not of art but of life. For myself, I have usually owed most to those simple observations on books which call attention to the behavior of our emotions in ordinary living. To make these observations is perhaps the achievement of only the ripest philosophy. I recall a class-hour twenty years ago, when George Edward Woodberry was initiating us into the genius of Keats. What was said at the beginning or in the middle of the period I do not remember, but just before the bell rang to dismiss the class Mr. Woodberry spoke of that wonderful last sonnet, "Bright star, would I were sted-

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fast as thou art." He called our attention to the fact that what Keats had to say was all in the final six lines, but that the first eight were more essential than perhaps they seemed, since without them we might not be in the mood to understand the poet's desire. Keats was leaving England, as he knew, to die, and his mind was on his betrothed, whom he was not to see again; in his sickness and despair he wished he might lay his head on her breast, and die in that comfort. "But," said Mr. Woodberry, "you cannot approach a stranger, who may be thinking of other things, and greet him with the news that you wish to lay your head on a certain woman's bosom; he may misinterpret you. Knowing the need, therefore, of preparing the reader for what he wishes to say, Keats makes us think first of the star, of the moon, of the moving waters, of the

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snow on mountains and moor—images vast, exalted and austere; he colors the lofty mood which attends these images by words and phrases connoting religion or religious ceremonial—‘Eremitic,’ ‘priest-like task,’ ‘pure ablution’; until our emotion, having passed through these introductory disciplines, is purified to interpret correctly the poet’s wish.”

These words of a great teacher of poetry illumine more than the verses under discussion; they open a vista of that sort of skill in managing the reader and in allowing for the way words and images are understood, which was the special gift of Keats. After Mr. Woodberry has shown the method, it is easy to read other things in Keats, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, or the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, for example. In *The Eve of St. Agnes* we have a story of exquisite delicacy, which must be told

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with delicacy if told at all. Porphyro, the lover, knowing that Madeleine hopes that night to dream of her future husband, resolves that she shall dream of him, or at least think she is dreaming of him. He therefore conceals himself in her room until she is asleep, and then with the soft chords of the lute he wakes her so gently that she sees him before she can distinguish the dream from the waking. She has really been dreaming of him, and now the actual Porphyro seems only the lover of her vision, turned suddenly pallid. The difficulty of the story lies, of course, in the hiding of Porphyro in Madeleine's room, but Keats ennobled the scene, as he secured the meaning of his sonnet, by manipulating in advance the emotions of his readers. Madeleine's room has a window of stained glass; when she enters the door her candle—her "taper," as Keats

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calls it—sends up its smoke in the pale moonshine, as if before an altar; the light of the moon falls on the silver cross she wears, and gives her hair a glory, like a saint's; her robes fall to her knees, and she slips into her "soft and chilly nest" as though her soul were a missal clasped, or a rose shut, to be a bud again. So managed, the reader takes the scene as Keats intended, and the disrobing of Madeleine is one of the clear purities of literature. But after Madeleine is awake and Porphyro has declared his passion, how is the poet to get her up and dressed, without breaking altogether the spell of the story! Even to suggest the question would be disastrous. Keats has the lovers out of the castle before we can think of the problem, if ever we do think of it; he lets the speed of the narrative sweep us over the danger before we know it is there.

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The *Ode on a Grecian Urn* exhibits, I think, an even more wonderful knowledge of human nature. The poet describes the two scenes painted on the urn, first rendering them as though they were actual life, and then contemplating their immortality in art. Most readers would say that the method is the same for both sides of the urn—first the picture, then the praise of its immortality. But the subject-matter of the paintings was not amenable to this treatment, and Keats allowed for a difference between one scene and the other. On one side of the urn a shepherd is piping, and a youth pursues a maiden. The painter has arrested forever in an attitude of beauty the swift flow of these experiences.

“Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not  
leave

Thy song, nor ever can those leaves be bare;



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Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss  
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not  
grieve;

She cannot fade, though thou have not thy  
bliss,

For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!”

With this picture of things which the memory would gladly linger on, the poet knows we shall have no quarrel. On the other side of the urn, however, is painted a heifer led to sacrifice. If this picture to be immortal? Shall we contemplate forever the priest about to slaughter the victim? Keats again gives us no opportunity to raise the question. With the poetic tact in which he is without a superior, he turns rather to a scene not represented on the urn, calls up the image of the village from which the sacrificial procession has come, makes us feel in a phrase the silence of the village streets, thus deserted, and

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then contemplates the immortality of that lovely silence and solitude.

“What little town by river or sea shore  
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn?  
And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell  
Why thou are desolate, can e’er return.”

These poems of Keats may be interpreted by a wisdom of life that in its simplicity seems rather the happy wit of experience than a system of thought. But more formal philosophy also may guide us from poet to poet. George Santayana's great sentence, that all life is animal in its origin and spiritual in its possible fruits, has given to many of us a scale against which to judge the complete poet, and also the poet who reports only our animal origins, or only our spiritual

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fruits. If all life has a natural basis, then any art which tells the whole truth of life must portray that basis; and if life has also spiritual ends, then no art is complete which fails to portray those ends. The love of Romeo and Juliet is of course based on such a natural desire as starts youth always to seeking its mate; Dame Nature seems to preside with as much puissance in Shakspeare's drama as in Chaucer's allegory of St. Valentine's day. But Romeo and Juliet differ, let us say from Antony and Cleopatra, in that their union has a meaning also for the mind and the heart. Shakspeare, reading life by a sound philosophy, comes at the truth that when we begin to be aware of a spiritual end in experience, the animal basis of it somewhat drops away from our thoughts; when we are truly in love, therefore, our passion seems to us a yearning chiefly or

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only of the soul. By this illusion, itself as natural as breathing, the hearts of men and women bestow upon the world a significance which without us it would not have, so far as we can see. Nor should we have occasion to feel this consecration of spirit, so far as we know, were we out of touch with the natural world. The poet who like Dante has gathered vast spiritual meanings from comparatively meager experiences in nature, and who tells us those meanings without initiating us into the natural basis of them, will prove for all but the rarest of readers a difficult poet—lofty and admirable, but not easily located in the world we know, not even in its heights. The poet should not separate himself from our world; rather, his art should rise upon it.

And his art should rise. We will not listen without protest to a mere recount-

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ing of those animal or material facts which, though undeniable, are soonest forgotten when we begin to consider the meaning of existence. It is a cheap trick of the so-called realist to strip away the spiritual raiment of life, that he may startle us with the sight of unaccommodated man. This is the one nudity which is unbearable. Our first parents faced it when, having sinned, they became realists, and were ashamed of themselves. "A lovely complexion is nothing but good digestion; why lose your heart to the efficiency of the digestive tract?" says the realist to the lover. "A violin is only a hollow box, strung with cat-gut and scratched on with horse-hair; why be stirred by Kreisler's playing?" says the realist to the musician. "A flag is but a cloth, cotton or silk; why die for your country?" says the realist to the patriot. Life thus con-

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sidered, exclusively in its physical bases, as if it had no spiritual ends, would seem indeed a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing. Those who are tired of the world may like such a portrait of it. The sane man takes life as a whole, as a complement of body and spirit, and he gives his affection to that poetry which follows the spirit, yet neither forgets nor dishonors the body.

### V

But let us return to our beginning. If our teaching of poetry springs from our delight in it, if we are not unwilling to read widely in the whole experience of the race, if we can recover from history something of the past and can learn from philosophy to understand the present, what more shall we add? Only this—to be still

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as we were at the beginning, lovers of poetry. It was from the example of our teachers that we learned most. Together with the historian and the scientist they felt the lure of scholarship, but we looked to our teachers of poetry not for scholarship alone. If we are to give our own students what they look for, we must keep fresh in ourselves, as we grow older, a capacity for that poetic experience which lighted our youth. No human task is easier or more beautiful. Or is it a task, or only a happy way of life? Plato described it for us. "Wise men are not philosophers," said the prophetess, "for they already have wisdom; and ignorant men are not philosophers, for being ignorant they do not know their need of wisdom." "Who then are philosophers?" cried Socrates. "Those intermediate persons among whom is Love."





# **THE NEW POETRY**



## THE NEW POETRY

### I

**I**T is easy to see why the "New Poetry" should at first excite violent attack and also inspire indignant defense. Many of the new poems do look at first a bit outrageous, especially to old-fashioned readers who have not read widely in old-fashioned literature. If we have forgotten or have never seen Macpherson's *Ossian* or the prophetic raptures of William Blake, we shall get the full flavor of novelty in these irregular lines, saved to the eye as verse by the essential capitals, and saved to the ear by nothing

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at all. If we have never been on familiar terms with Tennyson's English idyls, such as *Dora* or *Walking to the Mail*, we may think we have discovered a new art of flatness in blank verse which is like nothing so much as prose printed ten syllables at a stretch—good, chatty, domestic prose. Or if we have never felt the enchantment of Baudelaire's prose or Coleridge's, we may wrinkle our brows over a page of solid type protruding polyphonic cadences here and there. But a reader who knows the history of poetic experiment in English literature, even if he is ignorant of other languages, will find in the new poetry nothing that is really new, and nothing that need be condemned on theoretical grounds. For he will have observed long ago that meter and rhyme are but accompaniments of poetry, and not poetry itself, which is an effect of beauty,

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never to be confounded with rhetorical inventions, and which is produced by different races in different ways, according to their tastes, and in different ways by the same race at different times. This effect of beauty, which is what we have in mind when we say that verse is or is not poetic, is not altogether likely to make itself felt through meters or rhythms which are strange to us; yet we are not for that reason justified in refusing to master French or Greek prosody, nor is the contemporary poet necessarily foolish if he invites us to find poetry in his revival of old experiments in verse.

These reflections seem obvious, but emphasis upon them suggests itself as remedy for the kind of attack usually made on imagism and free verse. To be annoyed at the new poetry because it shows a growing indifference to rhyme, is

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to take a partisan stand on what has long been an open question—whether rhyme in English verse is a handicap or a blessing. Similarly, to complain that the imagists might as well print their work frankly in prose, since only the capitals tell us it is verse, is to lay ourselves open to the question whether we could distinguish Milton's verse from his best prose, if the capitals did not give us the hint. English verse rhythms in the hands of the masters have been so free (I except Pope), that the line between them and prose rhythms has never been successfully drawn; it is often difficult, therefore, to distinguish, save by capitals, between the poetry a man writes in verse and the poetry the same man writes in prose. This fact the imagists have grasped, and they seem to realize that it is important, but just what use to make of it perhaps they do not al-

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together see. Obviously, if verse rhythm in English is already so free, it is unnecessary to justify free verse by pointing to its "unrhymed cadence," whatever that may mean; and it is sheer nonsense to justify this new appreciation of an ancient freedom by hinting that the freedom never existed before. On the other hand, the critics of imagism often forget entirely the principle which the imagists only misapply. A troubled scholar has been at pains to show that imbedded innocently in Meredith's novels are many sentences which, printed as free verse, turn out to be admirable imagist poems. But what has he proved? Only what he knew before, and what a glance at Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations* would have recalled to him, that great prose, like great verse, often contains great poetry.

The suspicions aroused among the sen-

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sitive by the supposed newness of the new poetry, have been aggravated by the stream of energetic but reckless self-explanation which has flowed from certain of the imagists. Had the new poets simply written poems, with no campaign speeches in the interest of their own immortality, it might have been easier to realize that we are moving through one of those periodic and quite normal overhauls of poetic method by which any literature keeps itself vital. Every little while it will always occur to the thoughtful that poetry is going a little dead, that somehow a fresh relation must be established between it and life. If this conviction comes to a genius, the results are likely to be for the great benefit of poetry, but whatever the results the conviction is a sign of health in those who feel it; for it is impossible that art should be too vit-



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ally related to experience. These contemporaries, then, of whom we speak in a loose way as the new poets, are trying to restore vitality and reality to the technique of verse-writing. The most settled of old-fashioned critics, no matter what he thinks of imagism, would probably agree that few poems in the last twenty-five years have been in any great sense either vital or real. In their subjects as well as in their technique the new poets are trying for greater truth. Technically they wish to produce verses which will sound sincere, spontaneous, and natural. They wish neither the diction nor the rhythm of verse to depart so far from what the ear is accustomed to in common speech as to seem an artificial utterance. In this ideal they agree with Wordsworth; like him, they would make the ordinary serious conversation of men in some sort

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the standard of the poetic manner. If the rhythms they experiment with seem far removed from the Wordsworthian line, we should remember that the rhythms of our conversation and of our written prose to-day are also far removed from the rhythms of his conversation and prose. As for their subjects, the new poets wish to represent every picture as it looks to the eye, and every action as it is first gathered up in memory. Here again they parallel Wordsworth's desire to write with the eye on the object, but they stop with his method of observation; they have little use for his philosophy of feeling. Indeed, the attempt to see things as they are leads them to a subordination of feeling, to an emphasis upon intellectual keenness, even upon wit; so that many readers have suspected in this school a revival of the influence of Pope.

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Yet the new poets have probably had Wordsworth or Pope but seldom in their thoughts, nor do they owe perhaps as much to the verse of contemporary France as some imagistic prophets, Miss Lowell for example, think they owe, or think they should owe. They derive their methods, unconsciously or consciously, from the masters of modern realism; that is, their art is the product of much novel-reading. For decades we have been absorbing prose records of manners, of characters, of scenes; and almost any literary youngster in England or America has had some initiation into the "methods of fiction" or at least into the "art of the short story"; if we have taken no courses in these subjects in college, we have read books which made the whole matter clear, and most of us have tried to practise either the artful realism of the French or the naïve realism

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of the Russians—until a generation of readers and writers has grown up which sooner or later would be sure to transfer the methods of prose realism to verse. The new poetry is simply making the experiment for us. One obvious result of the transfer, as far as it has gone, is that we have something calling itself poetry which is curiously un-songlike—with no more singing-quality, in fact, than is found in the style of Turgenev or of Flaubert. Whether this defect of music is inevitable in novelized verse, or is only indicative of temporary embarrassments in a new medium, we must wait to see. But the fate of such a poet as Crabbe, nobly imaginative and passionately realistic though he was, should warn the new school what a retired corner of oblivion is reserved for the bard who cannot learn to sing. A second result of this transfer of

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realism is that all kinds of subjects are now available for verse, as they have been for the novel. This means that the charge once brought against prose realism, especially as practised in France, that it often deals with subjects of no spiritual significance—at times, preferably with brutal subjects—may well be made now against some of these realistic poems, in which the physical and the coarse are no less humiliating to the spirit than they were in prose. But this fault in taste is not essential in the method of realism; moreover, some allowance may be made for crudity of subject as well as of style in so bold an experiment. The main point is that the new poetry inherits its style from a prose ancestry and takes its methods and its subjects from the tradition of the novel; and we who like or dislike what we see are none the less witnessing one of those mu-

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tations by which from time to time literature re-invigorates itself, pouring old wine into new bottles or new wine into old bottles. In the Elizabethan period an immense amount of prose material was converted into poetic drama; a hundred years ago Scott took romance over into prose; now the new poetry is transferring to verse the brevity, the precision, and the honesty, of modern prose realism.

## II

In the process of any such mutation an artist lays himself open to attack from the unsympathetic. It has not escaped their critics that certain of the new poets who are now much advertised, once wrote in the old-fashioned way and were obscure; what more obvious slur upon them, then, than to suggest that they have cultivated eccentricity out of desperation, having

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failed to master the legitimate art? Walt Whitman himself, it is recalled, wrote some mediocre verses in the accepted rhythms before he invented his wonderful recitative. But the critic will hardly raise this reproach unless he has somewhat lost his head; for surely an artist who invests and adopts a medium suitable to his gifts, is not a knave but a sensible person, perhaps a genius. Unfortunately, the new poet rarely hears the reproach without also losing his head, his favorite retort being that the old mediums are worn out, and only the uninventive would be content with them; whereas, for those to whom they are natural, the old mediums will remain eternally modern.

The unsympathetic critic and the exasperated imagist may well take a lesson in good sense from Whitman, who honored the older art though convinced of the ne-

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cessity—for him—of the new. They might well consider also Browning's very pertinent account, in *Pippa Passes*, of the great artist some day to arrive: "Since his hand could manage a chisel, he has practised expressing other men's Ideals; and, in the very perfection he has attained to, he foresees an ultimate failure: his unconscious hand will pursue its prescribed course of old years, and will reproduce with a fatal expertness the ancient types, let the novel one appear never so palpably to his spirit. There is but one method of escape: confiding the virgin type to as chaste a hand, he will turn painter instead of sculptor, and paint, not carve, its characteristics. . . . Foolish Jules! and yet, after all, why foolish? He may—probably will—fail egregiously; but if there should arise a new painter, will it not be in some such way, by a poet, now, or a



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musician (spirits who have conceived and perfected an Ideal through some other channel), transferring it to this, and escaping our conventional roads by pure ignorance of them?" Whatever is lost in such a starting afresh, there will be this great advantage—provided, as Browning says, that we do not fail egregiously: our originality will be unfettered, our poetry will be more vital, the life we know will come more completely into the grasp of art. Innovations in poetry are not without precedent, and it is clear that they often herald a renaissance, whether we cite for illustration Dante's use of the vulgar tongue, or Wordsworth's use of the common vocabulary, or Whitman's use of free rhythms. The new poets may fail to justify their departure from custom, but reproach is hardly the proper greeting for their energetic attempt.

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It may be observed that Browning's ideal painter has first acquired skill in another art, and therefore has earned his right, as it were, to spontaneous utterance. The defenders of free verse are charged with providing a dangerous opportunity for their fellow citizens to appear in print without any artistic discipline whatever. Anyone, it is said, can write free verse. Perhaps anyone can; few of us, certainly, have refrained from trying, and the editors of newspaper columns and magazines seem willing to air the attempts. But unconscionable imitation is an incident to any success in art. Doubtless the new word-music of Petrarch and Dante in Italian encouraged many a cheap rhymester, who had neither their brains nor their training in Latin versification, to see what he could do in the mother tongue; certainly Wordsworth's use of

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conversational diction showed the way to a swarm of unpoetical folk who had neither his vision nor his feeling; and Whitman's departure from formal versification may be held responsible for volumes of bald prose printed with one sentence to each paragraph. But the undisciplined in art are never likely to have that store of ideas which Browning's painter acquires while mastering poetry or music or sculpture; and we may be sure that oblivion is the reward of poetasters in any style who have nothing to say.

Promiscuous writers of free verse may annoy, but not for long; those who are finally remembered will have earned their place by study and self-discipline. Indeed, instead of censuring the imagists for introducing an orgy of impromptu versifying, we might urge that the best of them have too lively a respect for their

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literary background. They have perhaps got less clear of the old rhythms than they think; for though an apparent freedom is in their lines, their own reading of them is haunted by ancient metric patterns, often by certain echoes of Greek and Latin prosody. To the unclassical reader their aim must seem elusive, but those of us who remember enough of our Greek to appreciate a good translation, are stirred with subtle memories when we examine the best of this new work. We do not see how anyone can get the full force of—let us say—the *Spoon River Anthology*, who has never read the Greek Anthology—preferably in translation. The imagists, like the rest of us, are profoundly indebted to Professor Mackail. Of course, the Greek melic poets, to whom the imagists refer us, composed in quite orthodox meters, but in faithful and dignified trans-

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lation they have much of the effect of the new free verse. We have all observed the same effect in Lafcadio's Hearn's translations of Japanese poetry, which we are told is curiously in sympathy with imagist principles; we have observed the same effect in the innumerable line for line translations of Alcaic or Sapphic stanzas with which British scholarship furnishes us; we have observed the same effect in those parts of Matthew Arnold's work which are most intentionally severe, and which often seem to be merely class-room translations of some larger Greek poet. In short, for those who have undergone the usual academic drill in the classics or in any other language than their own, a good translation yields an insidious, romantic pleasure, a precise yet tantalizing indication of what in the original was living and organic; and those who have the original

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in mind will easily attribute its vitality to the translation, whereas the reader who knows only the translation will miss a great deal. It is this consciousness of translation, this romance of second-hand expression, which the imagists seem to be cultivating; we might say that the originals of their poems never get written.

### III

I have spoken of the *Spoon River Anthology*, by Edgar Lee Masters. This book, now familiar to us for several years, represents better than any other what the new poets strive for; indeed, like every book of great vitality, it shows already a disposition to swallow up the reputation of other works in its kind, and of other kinds of writing by its author. It had an immediate success, and brought Mr. Mas-

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ters an inundation of praise. He was promptly welcomed by *The New York Times* as "the natural child of Walt Whitman," an honorable but not discriminating appraisal—and by many another journal as the poet of Americanism. On the other hand, he was sharply challenged for his chaotic rhythms, for his too frank subjects, for the bitterness of his outlook, and for the frequent anticlimax of his style. A few shrewd critics, detecting the novelist in him, compared his series of village portraits to the "Comédie Humaine." None, so far as I know, dwelt on the obvious fact that the book is a collection of epitaphs, not of poems, and that with one or two exceptions the epitaphs follow or parody the style of the Greek inscriptions; so that the severity of this style in contrast with the undignified or ridiculous substance of many of the confessions, pro-

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duces that effect of irony, almost of bitterness, which constitutes for most readers the distinct, if finally somewhat monotonous, appeal of the book. The critics might have added that the method throughout is rhetorical, not poetic. What simple philosophy the inscriptions as a whole convey, is not insinuated to the soul through a melody, as in FitzGerald's *Omar*, but is discharged into the most reluctant heads by rhetorical catapults. This mortal life is full of queer changes and chances, thinks the poet; therefore these epitaphs begin nobly and then drop us into bathos, into absurdity, into horror, or they begin on a plane of disillusion and then jerk us up into a poetic mood. Few books are so exciting to read. A still more searching criticism might have been made, that while Mr. Masters calls our attention with remarkable power to the physical or



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material facts of life, he too seldom includes the ideal values which properly go along with those facts and which are at least as important in human experience and destiny. This criticism, it should be noticed, is such as would more frequently concern a novelist than a poet.

But whatever has been or might be said for or against the *Spoon River Anthology*, and whether it be the work of an imagist or not, it is easily the most effective product so far of the new vitality in our literature. Among its other services, it has cleared the air for American verse; after its hard, clean-cut intelligence the vaporings of "Petit the Poet" are for the time being at least self-condemned. And since Mr. Masters, like the novelist he essentially is, kept a consistent point of view in all his character-portraits, it seems that our volumes of verse must henceforth pre-

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tend to the same kind of unity, no longer serving as receptacles for cold magazine poems miscellaneously gathered up. While the influence of the book endures, our poetry is likely to engage itself with studies of American character, whereas hitherto it rarely approached nearer to the facts than to theorize lyrically as to what Americanism should be. If Mr. Masters had published nothing but the *Anthology*, I should have added that wherever the book continued its influence, the lyric note would give way to realistic painting; but in his later volumes, from *Songs and Satires* to *Starved Rock*, there is promise enough that contemporary poetry may keep its realism and regain its singing voice. I do not refer to those orthodox lyrics in regular metres with which some of Mr. Masters' later books are diluted; we must think them early work, for

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some unlucky reason resurrected. I refer rather to the pieces in the freer rhythms, which published alone would have made a volume far more important than the *Spoon River Anthology*, but less scandalously startling.

Robert Frost's *North of Boston* dates somewhat earlier than the appearance in book form of the *Spoon River Anthology*, but for obvious and not discreditable reasons it made its way more slowly. The book is entirely without the rhetorical brilliance and the irony of Mr. Masters, and the subjects it treats of are fewer and narrower; yet there are persons who consider it the most solid poetic achievement of our day. In his observation and in his style Mr. Frost constantly suggests Wordsworth. He avoids the free rhythms of the imagists, not apparently because he cannot use them, but because he does

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not need to, since the Wordsworthian conversational line affords him all the freedom he desires. Like Mr. Masters, he has the novelist's point of view, and here, of course, he departs from the Wordsworthian tradition; he studies characters and manners for their own sake, and though everything he writes indicates a deep and broad human sympathy, he permits himself less moralizing or philosophizing than is found even in the *Spoon River Anthology*. Occasionally he strikes out a haunting line, rarely powerful and rarely obvious, but not to be forgotten—like the first line and the last in the volume: "Something there is that does not love a wall," and, "With the slow smokeless burning of decay." And the beautiful prologue and still finer epilogue suggest that the low poetic temperature of the main part of the book is intentional,

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and that when he chooses Mr. Frost can turn pure lyricist. Indeed, his poetic equipment is in its way far more subtle than that of Mr. Masters, but he has as yet shown no such range of observation, no such mental vigor, no such ability to grip the attention, and it remains to be seen whether he can handle other subjects than those in his book—country incidents and characters, for the most part eccentric or unusual. The style of the *Spoon River Anthology* has been imitated and parodied, but not its content, for Mr. Masters gets his subject matter out of his own point of view, which cannot easily be imitated. It is the subjects, however, of *North of Boston* which have invited parody, for Mr. Frost has generally selected material which needs only to be transcribed in order to be effective. If this is to be his permanent method, his range

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may be small and his contribution finally negligible, for he will have to avoid the obvious things that lie in the highway of our interest. But the poem which he wisely set at the opening of his volume, *Mending Wall*, a noble interpretation of a familiar incident, gives assurance of powers not yet developed in him.

Miss Amy Lowell has made herself the chief apologist for imagism, and we therefore think of her first as a critic and as an orator; not even such clever books as *Sword Blades and Poppy Seeds* and *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass* and the recent *Pictures of the Floating World* could dwarf her reputation as a theorist and propagandist. Without her aid as advocate, there would probably have been no new "school" at all—only the poetry of Masters and Frost. What her reputation would have been had she confined herself

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to creative writing, probably none of us is impartial enough to guess correctly. The defects and the merits of her verse are singularly obvious, yet a mere recital of them helps us little towards appraising her ability. She writes easily in the new rhythms and awkwardly in the old; she has little knowledge of character, in the novelist's sense; she has little interest, it seems, in what goes on in modern society; she is the most literary of all the new school, and her subjects are entirely bookish; she seems to have, finally, no special aptitude for the lyric or for narrative, as we can see clearly from such labored performances as *Guns are Keys*. On the other hand, she is a wit, and she has a talent for monologue. It is not surprising, therefore, that her best poems, in spite of their imagist intentions, appeal to the ear rather than to the visual imagination,

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and one has only to hear her read them to know how beautifully sensitive she is to the spoken phrase. In this department she has rendered American verse a great service, for poets always need to be reminded, either by precept or by an attractive example, that the natural phrase is a sacred thing, not to be sacrificed to exigencies of the line or the rhyme. Of course it does not follow that we need sacrifice the line or the rhyme to the exigencies of the phrase. But Miss Lowell's verse and her reading of it have helped to restore to contemporary verse firmness and naturalness of phrase—or, as she perhaps would say, of cadence.

In fact, her insistence upon the quality of the phrase is of the greatest importance, and is sufficient cause for the attention she has deservedly received. The cadence of American speech is no longer the same



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as that of English, and it was from English models that the best American poets fifty years ago learned the cadence both of their speech and of their verse; it is not surprising therefore that to the American ear to-day the fall of Tennyson's line, or Lowell's, or Longfellow's, sounds strange, almost foreign. Our average fellow-citizen speaks more directly now, with less subtlety and also with less delay. Our conversation is a succession of hammerstrokes, not links of sweetness long drawn out. Whether or not we approve, this is the fact, and we need not wonder that a people whose talk is such should ask for verse which preserves, in however elevated a form, the same fashion of discourse. In this point at least the younger generation hail Miss Lowell as a prophet of their sentiments; she quotes for them verse which sounds American, whatever it

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may mean, and they have been hungry for verse the cadence of which should be native to their ear.

### IV

As for the imagists as a whole, it is inconceivable that the general reader should ever have found them perplexing, had not their poems been introduced and accompanied by a critical defense too often unsound and distracting. I do not myself know who belong to the school and who do not, though I have read all the definitions of Miss Lowell and her collaborators. To me the new poets generally considered important all seem eligible as imagists, and I would include Edward Arlington Robinson, who was studying the cadence of American speech before Miss Lowell gave her attention to it. Most of us first heard of imagism in the January

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number of *Poetry*, 1913, where a London correspondent of the magazine, Ezra Pound, had this to say: "The youngest school here that has the nerve to call itself a school is that of the *Imagistes*. . . . Space forbids me to set forth the programme of the *Imagistes* at length, but one of their watchwords is Precision, and they are in opposition to the numerous and unassembled writers who busy themselves with dull and interminable effusions, and who seem to think that a man can write a good long poem before he learns to write a good short one, or even before he learns to produce a good single line." Had the theory of imagism remained so simple and so sane, there could have been no just quarrel with it. There could be little objection to the three rules of imagism, as formulated by F. S. Flint in a later number of *Poetry*: "1. Direct treat-

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ment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective. 2. To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation. 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome." But even in these innocent rules, two tendencies of later imagistic criticism show themselves—the tendency to use blind phrases, and the tendency to ascribe awful shortcomings to the older rhythms. "To compose in sequence of the musical phrase." Does that mean the same thing as "to compose in the musical phrase?" Have we been puzzled by some words that "did not contribute to the presentation" of this theory? And what English poet, save George Gascoigne, unknown to imagists, needed to be told not to compose to the metronome? In the same number of *Poetry* the London correspondent, having evidently become

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heart and soul devoted to the school, gives a list of "Don'ts by an *Imagiste*," a combination of platitudes and original nonsense which is either amusing or exasperating, according to your temperament. The first advice under the head of "Rhythm and Rhyme" begins: "Let the candidate fill his mind with the finest cadences he can discover, preferably in a foreign language, so that the meaning of the words may be less likely to divert his attention from the movement."

The advice to translate, the advice to take counsel of the contemporary French poets, which this critic gives freely, is in tune with Miss Lowell's statement, in the preface to her *Sword Blades and Poppy Seeds*, that she owed an immense debt to the French, to the Parnassian and to the later groups. Indeed Miss Lowell finds it difficult to speak of poetry without cit-

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ing the admirable qualities of the French and the general shortcomings of the Anglo-Saxon. She also finds it difficult to cite this unfortunate difference without adding an elusive illustration—elusive at least to the mere English or American brain; so that those who have read or heard her criticism learn to expect shortly after any reference to modern French poetry, a depressing sense of having lost their bearings. To illustrate by a paragraph from this same preface:

“It is because in France, to-day, poetry is so living and vigorous a thing, that so many metrical experiments come from there. . . . The poet with originality and power is always seeking to give his readers the same poignant feeling which he has himself. To do this he must constantly find new and striking images, delightful and unexpected forms. Take the word

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'daybreak,' for instance. What a remarkable picture it must once have conjured up! The great, round sun, like the yolk of some mighty egg, *breaking* through cracked and splintered clouds. But we have said 'daybreak' so often that we do not see the picture any more; it has become only another word for dawn."

That is: because poetry is vital in France, we get metrical experiments from the French. A real poet writes to convey his feeling to the reader. (Exit the topic of metrical experiments.) To convey your idea to your reader, you must get a new image. (Enter the topic of images.) Take "day-break" for instance. (Exit the French entirely, along with the metrical experiments.) Miss Lowell apparently thinks that the sun at dawn pops out, great and round, through cracked and splintered clouds.

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Since Miss Lowell has done most of the pleading for imagism, it is not surprising that though she is sometimes the least effective advocate the school has, she is also sometimes the best. To her is commonly attributed the excellent preface to the anthology called *Some Imagist Poets*. The principles of imagism, she there tells us, "are not new; they have fallen into desuetude. They are the essentials of all great poetry, indeed of all great literature, and they are simply these:

"1. To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word, not the nearly exact, nor the merely decorative word.

"2. To create new rhythms—as the expression of new moods—and not to copy old rhythms, which merely echo old moods. We do not insist upon 'free verse' as the only method of writing poetry. We



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fight for it as for a principle of liberty. We believe that the individuality of a poet may often be better expressed in free verse than in conventional forms. In poetry, a new cadence means a new idea.

“3. To allow absolute freedom in the choice of the subject. . . .

“4. To present an image (hence the name: ‘Imagist’). We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous. . . .

“5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.

“6. Finally, most of us believe that concentration is of the very essence of poetry.”

Probably any good craftsman at any stage of poetic history would subscribe to this pronouncement, if allowed to define

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the terms which it employs. But probably a mature poet would also observe that these excellent rules, like most which the imagists give us, have this trait of youth, that they operate from the outside inward. Acquire new cadences, the imagists advise us, so that you may express a new idea; yet if we have the new idea and try to give it sincere expression, it is hard to see how we shall miss a new rhythm. The excellence of Mr. Masters and of Mr. Frost is that they have built their art from the inside outward, and their success illustrates once more, what the young poet will not easily learn, that a large audience waits for those whose heart and mind compel them to speak. If the new poets aspire to great work, they will take heed to their subjects as well as to their technique; they will put themselves in touch with the ideas that are stirring our democracy, and

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they will make themselves our spokesmen. To such an end the study of French poetry will aid chiefly the French poets. In France the poets have access to many intellectual groups, and can at any time catch early glimpses of the visions which later are to fire the whole people. In this country the only organized seeding grounds of ideas are the large universities, and for academic centres our poets nowadays have some contempt. Yet if it is to go far, the new poetry will somehow associate itself for mutual sympathy and interpretation, with every vital stream of social and philosophical thought. The poetic instruments are ready. The subjects lie before us. But the readers who now wait for the poets have had too long a discipline to bestow the laurel on the mere phrase-maker or on the unthoughtful.



**SCHOLARSHIP AND  
POETRY**



## SCHOLARSHIP AND POETRY,

### I

**I**T is our habit when we study poetry to study it somewhat exclusively from the point of view of the reader. We counsel the reader to seek in the great poems not an historical record nor a philosophical doctrine but a poetic experience; but in either case we usually imply that only the reader has a relation to poetry and that the only kind of scholarship of which criticism should give an account is the scholarship which helps us to admire what the poet has created. But the poet

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needs a scholarship of his own before he can create at all.

If criticism has not paid sufficient attention to this kind of scholarship which belongs peculiarly to the poet, perhaps it is because many critics believe sincerely that the poet should not be a scholar, that much learning will check his inspiration or at least will taint his song with bookishness, that the artist is likely to be most happy in theme and in manner when his emotions play freely upon life, unprejudiced by the feelings other men have had in the same situation and unconstrained by the haunting cadence or the persistent accent of their voices. To be sure, the critics would not entertain such a theory if they realized the difference between the scholarship which is good for the reader and that which is good for the poet. The knowledge of history will bring the reader



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to the doorstep of the poet he studies; it will enable him to approach old poems as though he were contemporary with them; and when it has brought him to the same date as the poem and to the same background as the poet had, the possession of a philosophy will enable him to enter into the poet's thought. Yet there is no reason why the poet should be historian or philosopher. He might of course be both; Dante and Shakspeare and Milton were to some extent historians and philosophers. But the scholarship of which the poet simply as a poet has need is the knowledge and the command of his language. The reader, since he sees first the frame and the outer flesh, as it were, of poetry, must learn to observe that inner heart of it which is subject to no evolution, but is the same always; the poet, however, who begins with an inspiration that seems to him im-

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mortal, must learn to speak in the tongue of his day and place. Like other artists he must be master of his medium.

Let us add that by language should be understood far more than words and far more than grammar. The poet must indeed be an artist in words, but a pedantic interest in his vocabulary will without question harm him rather than aid. By language let us understand not only the sound of our syllables but all that we talk with besides—those familiar stories, images or allusions, those memories of typical experience and of characteristic action, which more than mere words establish communication between men. To make ourselves understood at all it is necessary to use language long repeated; whatever other originality an artist should have, he should not try to invent a new speech, for if he does so he will for the

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time at least be the only person who understands it. How often primitive man must have tried his earliest syllables and must have listened to the elementary grunts and groans of his neighbors before he and they were quite sure what the inflection and the accent meant. Even in the most developed language we need a setting to be quite sure of our exclamations. The first man who stubbed his toe on a boulder may have said "Ouch" as the most cultivated philosopher would say it now, but who could tell whether his mental state was one of anger, or of half amusement, or of heroism in making light of a serious hurt? With centuries of tradition in any civilized tongue we are not always sure what such expressions really convey, unless we know the speaker and understand the incidents in which he has exclaimed—in short, unless we know the

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setting of his emotions. The size of an artist's audience, whether the artist be important or very minor, depends upon the carrying power of the language he uses, and this carrying power depends among other things on the number of times the language has been used. To be generally understood, therefore, language must be traditional, and art, to be enjoyed by more people than the artist, must have and must preserve a certain continuity in the general mind of the race.

If poetry begins with the primitive sounds of speech and if those sounds must be repeated an infinite number of times before they have gathered into themselves a race significance, the next stage in the growth of poetry may be illustrated by those human episodes which in their more coherent forms we call folk-lore—brief narrative framings of attitudes

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which have struck the attention of men. 'A very few appeals to memory are often enough to indicate character and to call up a more precise portrait of our experience than we could trust to the single word. Emerson thought that the foundation of this stage of poetry lay in nature; "the proverbs of nations," he says, "consist usually of a natural fact, selected as a picture or parable of a moral truth. Thus: A rolling stone gathers no moss; A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush; A cripple in the right way will beat a racer in the wrong; Make hay while the sun shines; 'Tis hard to carry a full cup even; Vinegar is the son of wine; The last ounce broke the camel's back." We do indeed use nature to talk with; but we also to a much greater extent convert human conduct into speech, and certain aspects of behavior soon become a kind of verbal

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counter with which to reckon the character of our fellows. "When he began to act that way," we say, "I knew what kind of man he was," or "A person who would do that would rob a church." In the street the least literary of us is still talking with these faint suggestions of narrative. "It's like taking candy from a child," we hear the passer-by remark; in the phrase there is already a plot.

If we obviously cannot talk at all without sounds, it is just as true, though not perhaps so generally recognized, that we can have no important poetry without folk-lore or whatever one cares to call these incipient stories which men make up in order to communicate with each other. The business of the great poet is to communicate with his fellow men by using this common language which their practice has already prepared for him. However new

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may be the message he brings, he must speak the language they understand. In order to be a poet at all, therefore, he must have the mastery, not only of words, but of what is even more important, those narrative elements which are most current in the consciousness of his fellows, and he must cultivate the tact with which to turn those elements to a new meaning. Toward this kind of scholarship, as I said, criticism too seldom directs our attention.

## II

Yet it is not overrash to say that all the great poets have had this kind of scholarship; they have drawn on old material, which their audience knew well, and by means of it they have said something new. What their method was we can observe by following the course of any world-story as they changed it and rededicated it.

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The story of Odysseus, for example, was old long before Homer told and changed it. In the folk-lore of the Greeks Odysseus seems to have been at first a very tricky man, one who could be counted on to make his way by crafty methods. Hesiod tells us that when the suitors were wooing Helen, Odysseus sent her no gifts, believing that Menelaus would win her anyway. We cannot be sure that this thrift was disapproved in the first stage of the legend; childish strategy of this sort has in other instances won the admiration of simple minds. But in a more complex version the character of Odysseus before Homer ennobled it was clearly remembered by the Greeks with scorn and contempt, and this version was the more popular. In it Odysseus, the trickster, was contrasted with Palamedes, the truly wise man. Palamedes, according to legend,



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had invented certain letters of the alphabet; he had combined in a convenient form and domesticated, as it were, the luck of mortal existence by the invention of dice; he was the first to build lighthouses; he invented certain measures and scales which came into general use; and he first made the discus, and developed that art of throwing it which to the Greeks as well as to us typifies their physical grace. In short, he was a singularly public-spirited genius, and his direct contributions to the welfare of the community had in them poetic implications, which elevated the memory of their inventor. Odysseus, on the other hand, invented nothing of benefit to mankind, and his cleverness usually served him best at those moments when he wished to avoid a public obligation. When Menelaus called upon the other suitors to remember their oaths and come to the res-

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cue of Helen, Odysseus pretended to have gone crazy, and to prove himself mad he began to plow the sea-shore with furious zeal. It was Palamedes who unmasked the trick, by setting Telemachus, the infant child of Odysseus, in the very path of the frantic oxen and the sharp plow. Odysseus turned the oxen aside, thereby showing that he had his wits about him. He made no further protest against taking part in the Trojan expedition, but he plotted revenge, and later, as one of the cyclic poets recorded, he caused Palamedes to be drowned while he was engaged in fishing off the coast of Troy. There was another version of the treachery; Odysseus was said to have placed Trojan gifts in the tent of Palamedes, and to have persuaded the Greeks that the wise inventor was in communication with Priam, so that they stoned the inno-

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cent man to death for a spy. This is the story as Ovid remembered it in the *Metamorphoses*.

Homer for some reason chose to take another view of the character of Odysseus. Perhaps he had no need in his epics for two rivals in shrewdness. At all events, he suppressed entirely the legend of Palamedes, never even mentioning the name of that hero, and he imagined Odysseus as a noble character, admirable in his behavior as a warrior, long-suffering in his wanderings, and by his heroic endurance deserving well the brilliant restoration of his fortunes on his return. Palamedes lingered for a while in the race-memory of the Greeks as the type of magnanimity done to death by meanness; one of the lost plays of Euripides took him for its theme. But the genius of Homer sufficed to establish Odysseus permanently in his career

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as romantic hero, and his earlier reputation gradually faded away.

The poets who, following Homer, completed the story of Troy and of the Greek heroes, were reluctant, it seems, to let the adventures of Odysseus end in a quiet old age in Ithaca; so inquisitive a nature, with so long a habit of wandering, could hardly be content with a sedentary life. His experiences were continued, therefore, in two ways—he was represented as enjoying new adventures, and as suffering the retribution, as it were, of former ones. The poem called the *Telegony* told how he became restless after a while, and how, making some excuses to Penelope, he sailed to the island of Thesprotis, tarried there for some time, and was even wedded to the queen of the country. This episode, an obvious echo of the sojourn with Circe or with Calypso, was feeble enough as a

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prolongation of the legend, and would hardly draw our attention now, if a greater poet than the author of the *Telegony* had not revived the idea that after a brief stay in Ithaca Odysseus once more took ship. The *Telegony* gave also an account of the wanderer's death. Hesiod says that when Odysseus had lingered in Circe's halls, she had borne him three sons, one of whom was Telegonus. The author of the *Telegony*, adapting an old situation familiar in folk-lore and known to modern readers in the story of Sohrab and Rustum, of Cuchulain and Conloach, told how Telegonus grew up and at last went forth to seek his father, and how, arriving at Ithaca, unrecognized and without means of recognizing the aged king, he accidentally met him, got into a quarrel with him, and Oedipus-like killed him. What color the poet gave the story we do not know, since

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the plot here recounted survived only in the summaries of literary historians. Evidently it made no impression on the popular imagination, and for hundreds of years Odysseus remained what Homer had made him.

It was Dante who next developed the story. He also was persuaded that Odysseus did not remain at home after the return to Ithaca. In the twenty-sixth canto of the *Inferno* Ulysses and Diomed appear among the Evil Counsellors, and Ulysses tells how he died. Neither love for his son, he says, nor love for his father, nor the love he owed Penelope, could overcome his ardor to know more of the world, of human vice and virtue; therefore he put forth to sea in a single ship with the few old comrades left, and they came to the narrow waters where Hercules had set up his pillars, that men might not venture

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beyond. There Ulysses appealed to his fellows, in the brief twilight of life remaining, not to deny themselves knowledge of the uninhabited world behind the sun. "Remember from what you come; you were not made to live like beasts, but to follow virtue and knowledge." They then became so eager for the voyage, that he could hardly have checked them, and turning toward the dawn they pursued their foolish flight; till there appeared to them a mountain, the highest they had ever seen, and from this new land a tempest arose, which sunk the ship.

Dante does not mean to approve of this quest of Ulysses; he makes the repentant spirit call it himself a "foolish flight." He does not otherwise intend that Ulysses should have our admiration. Without any reference to the old story of Palamedes, the Italian poet is the champion of Rome,

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and to him Ulysses and Diomed would naturally seem evil counsellors; he says specifically that their torments in hell are for their treachery in the matter of the wooden horse, for their forcing Achilles into the Trojan war and so to his death, and for their theft of the image of Pallas, the loss of which made it possible for Troy to fall. The advice to wander once more was only the last evil counsel which Odysseus gave. But in spite of this prejudice Dante, true poet, himself a tragic wanderer, makes Odysseus speak with a noble accent when he admonishes his companions to remember from what they came—not to live like beasts but to follow virtue and knowledge.

“Considerate la vostra semenza :  
fatti not foste a viver come bruti,  
ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza.”



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These are the lines in Dante's account of Odysseus that have touched modern sentiment, and have seemed to modern poets worthy of expansion. It is not without significance that in Alan Seeger's beautiful rendering of this canto Dante's condemnation of the quest shrinks to nothing; the "folle volo" is not translated at all. Though he worked from the Italian text, the young American poet was really echoing Tennyson's *Ulysses*, in which Dante's phrase of the following of knowledge is made to illuminate modern horizons. In Tennyson, for a while at least, this old world-story of Odysseus becomes once more fixed as a part of our language; by these changes at the hands of scholar-poets, the legend of trickery and treachery has been transmuted into the image of a long-memoried race still in the search for truth—

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    this grey spirit yearning in desire  
To follow knowledge like a sinking star  
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

### III

The story of Prometheus has had perhaps an even more distinguished experience in literature than that of Odysseus, though it can be somewhat more briefly told. Hesiod says that the Titans, the "Strainers," were so called because they strained after the power of the gods, and in the earliest version of the story Prometheus, the greatest of the Titans, was simply a kind of tricky Odysseus who carried on by his wits a prolonged and disastrous warfare against Zeus. He began by deceiving the god in the first partition of the sacrifices. Having slain an ox, he placed in one pile the savoury meat covered with

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the skin and in another the skeleton covered with the mere fat; and he then asked Zeus which portion should belong to the gods. Zeus rather greedily selected the fat pile, and discovered later than he had done what Prometheus wished him to do. In revenge he withheld from earth altogether the gift of fire. Prometheus then managed to steal the fire from heaven and bring it back to men. Zeus then had Pandora created with her fatal gifts, and sent her into the world to be the ruin of mankind. However the fact seems prettily disguised, the legend meant that in order to punish Prometheus Zeus created woman to be the pest of man henceforth. Prometheus himself was bound to the crag. Later stories told how he was released from his torture by Heracles.

This myth in its early form laid equal stress upon the disposition of the sacri-

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fices, upon the stealing of the fire from heaven, and upon the creation of Pandora. It was the genius of Aeschylus that he emphasized in the story the stealing of the fire. His great play *Prometheus Bound* made the Titan, once for all, the image of those saviours of mankind who scale even the heights of heaven for the good of the race. So far as I know, no other poet has ever elevated a common legend by selection so simple to a meaning so sublime. From the day of the Greek dramatist until now European literature has spoken through the image of the Titan when it would express revolutionary and humane ideals. No one has attempted since Aeschylus to alter the character of Prometheus; later poets have occupied themselves with the secret of his deliverance, explaining how he did at last get free from the crag. It was not in the temper

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of modern times, at least, to account for this deliverance solely by the advent of Heracles. Rather it seemed necessary to place the secret of his rescue in the logic of his own character. It would be superfluous now to discuss in detail the many beautiful versions of the deliverance of Prometheus, since George Edward Woodberry has studied them at length for us in that rare book of his, *The Torch*.

From more recent literature might be added other illustrations of this development of folk-lore and legend into the mature language of poetry. The English race has often expressed itself through the character of King Arthur. He is one person in Malory, another in Spenser, and quite another in Tennyson, to take the three main instances; and in each case his story is made to indicate what that particular age had to say. We are not al-

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ways quick, perhaps, to observe the immense difference between these versions. In Tennyson, for example, when Arthur bids farewell to Guinevere in an austere, beautifully-worded declaration of his own virtues and of her errors, we take it for granted perhaps that Arthur always loved Guinevere above everything else in the world, and that his relation to her, in all histories of him, was the most precious he recognized. Unless we are aware of the immense difference between chivalry before Spenser and chivalry after him, we are startled to come on the terms with which Arthur in Malory's book laments over Launcelot and Guinevere, dismissing the loss of his queen as a minor misfortune, and spending his chief tears on Launcelot. "Alas that ever I bare crown upon my head, for now have I lost the fairest fellowship of noble knights that

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ever held Christian king together. Alas, my good knights be slain away from me; now within these two days I have lost forty knights, and also the noble fellowship of Sir Launcelot and his blood, for now I may never hold them together no more with my worship. Alas, that ever this war began. . . . Wit ye well, my heart was never so heavy as it is now, and much more I am sorrier for my good knights' loss than for the loss of my fair queen, for queens I might have enow, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company; and now I dare say," said King Arthur, "that there was never Christian king held such a fellowship together, and alas that Sir Launcelot and I should be at debate."

It is not necessary here to recall Shakspeare's habitual use of old material for the plots of his dramas; in the kind of

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scholarship proper to a poet he was one of the most scholarly children of the muses, who were themselves, according to the Greek myth, the children of memory. It was his habit to make his play always on some theme already widely diffused, but to transmute the old story into the more exquisite experience which he alone could imagine. To compare Macbeth in the chronicle with Macbeth in the play, or the Romeo and Juliet of Arthur Brooke with the young lovers of the same name now dear to all who read, is to wonder first at the closeness with which Shakspeare follows his material, and in the second place, at the extraordinary originality of what he says with it. He would be better understood if we remembered that for him the plot itself was a part of the language with which he portrayed human nature, and that the changes he makes in



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an old story are but as a novelty of accent on a familiar word. To master his whole intention we must therefore be ourselves somewhat scholarly in the language he employs; sometimes we must know what was the earlier version of the plot before we can quite see the character he would portray. Many actresses play Viola in *Twelfth Night* as if she were somewhat melancholy; the shadow of her shipwreck and the possible loss of her brother apparently suggest to them that she had in her some tendency to brood upon fate. Aside from the episode of the shipwreck, however, nothing in the drama would suggest that she was otherwise than light-hearted, witty, and life-loving—a close cousin to Rosalind, though with her own individuality. Unless one knows something of the story before Shakspeare used it, the shipwreck engages more of our

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sympathy than it deserves. The earlier version is of a girl who for love of the Duke, of whom she has heard, goes to his country disguised as a boy, and takes service with him, under the name of her own twin brother. From Shakspeare's development of his sources in other plays, we are assured that his usual purpose in altering a plot is to refine or spiritualize some character; hero or villain in his treatment becomes more deeply penetrated with mind than before. The Viola he conceived of could go through the other experiences of the original story, but she would not set out with the crude resolve to look up the eligible young man she had heard of. He therefore brings her to Illyria by accident, and in his time shipwreck was a familiar accident. The opening of the play, therefore, is not to be understood as a vision of sudden death,

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remembered sensitively by a feminine De Quincey; it is simply as though the storyteller began, "Now Viola happened to arrive in Illyria, where lived a certain Duke."

The same poetic scholarship can be observed in more modern instances, and not exclusively in the narrative or dramatic poets. Burns and Wordsworth are as good examples as Shakspeare, in spite of the general belief on the part of their most devoted readers that their inspiration was not from books but from nature without and from their own hearts within. Wordsworth thought we might get moral wisdom from an impulse of the vernal wood; the theory is not impaired by the patent fact that he often got material for his poems from what others had written—from his sister's diary, from books of travel, from other poets. Like Shakspeare

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and Homer and all the artists, whatever their degree, he made the old material express something personal and original with him; like them also, he never tried to invent a new experience of life nor a new language. His lines *To a Cuckoo* are not less beautiful because they are a rewriting of Michael Bruce's poem, nor *The Solitary Reaper* less original because it is taken, in some lines word for word, from a sentence in Thomas Wilkinson's *Tour in Scotland*, nor the *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality* less majestic because Wordsworth had studied Henry Vaughan's *Retreat*. Of Burns the same thing can be said. He was saturated with Scottish song and folk-lore, and the careless readers who detect in *Duncan Gray*, or *My heart is sair*, or *Comin thro' the rye* nothing but the improvisings of a natural poet, do not know Burns. There is no

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such thing as a natural poet, if by natural we mean without art; for all art is continuous in its language, however spontaneous in its impulse, and a poet who was ignorant of the tradition prepared for him, or who did not use it, would be reduced to the same meagerness of expression, in so far as his audience is concerned, as man experienced in the childhood of the race, until some more complex brain began to utter itself in new sounds—sounds novel to its own ears and incomprehensible to others.

Not Browning himself, our modern-seeming psychologist, who takes his themes so obviously from the life around him, is independent of traditional language. He was more than scholarly, he was antiquarian in his search for old stories with which to say new things; indeed, the material out of which he made

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his language was often not only old but unfamiliar, so that even when his thought was not difficult, his expression of it frequently was. *Fra Lippo Lippi* might be compared with Landor's *Filippo Lippi and Eugenius IV*, in the *Imaginary Conversations*, if one needed an example of what Browning drew from his predecessors. The comparison might remind us also what his debt was to Landor for other things than this one character. Landor taught him especially the method of psychological dialogue. But what did Landor not teach, to a host of nineteenth century poets, from Southey to Swinburne! Himself unusually learned in poetic material, he was rarely able to say with it a message that the general reader could appreciate; but the poets understood him, and through them his language and much of his content has been spread abroad.

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We do not yet recognize as perhaps some day we shall, how variously he enriched modern English literature.

### IV

If folk-lore, or a body of legend and stored-up experience, must be diffused in a nation before there can be a literature, it is not surprising that poetry in the United States is still an undeveloped art. Not undeveloped, perhaps; it would be fairer to say that its development is arrested. We formerly had for a time a common literary inheritance, understood by people of average education. Now, however, we are become a nation of many ancestries—which in art means of no ancestry at all. Those Americans whose heritage is British can understand the poet who speaks in the language of English poetry; those whose race-memory is

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Latin, or Slavic, or Oriental, can follow the stories of their particular groups; but no group is likely to be at home in the tradition of the other, and since a natural good-will suggests that we do not talk too much of things our neighbor does not understand, we are impelled not to use at all the old material of poetry. There still might be for many readers in this country, as there is for European readers, a kind of international language of poetry derived from the classics; we are not yet so far away from our Latin and Greek, once the language of all poets, that we cannot use an old story of Athens or Rome, to express some new idea. No English poem in recent years is more modern in feeling than Stephen Phillips' *Marpessa* or his *Christ in Hades*, nor does any French poet in the last fifty years express a larger share of the modern spirit



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than Auguste Angellier in his volumes *Dans la Lumière Antique*. But within the United States a prejudice has grown against all poetic tradition, therefore against the classic. Our democratic impulse to speak of nothing which our neighbor cannot understand is leading us fast to assume that our neighbor can understand very little, and the mere sight of a Greek or Roman name in a poem is enough to frighten off the majority of reviewers and readers. The poet, therefore, who writes in the poetic terms of any nationality now represented in the United States is likely to limit his audience to his fellow-nationals, and the poet who uses what used to be the *lingua franca* of poetry by transforming familiar classic myth into a modern story, runs the risk of estranging all readers, whatever their origin.

The obvious remedy would seem to be

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to encourage the growth of American legend and to use in our poetry the myths we already have. Until very recently, however, there has been no great disposition to do this; in fact many of the new poets have embarked resolutely on another policy, which however mistaken is undoubtedly sincere, and which is suggested by the predicament in which the American poet finds himself without a ready language familiar to his audience. These new writers of whom I speak have attempted in theory to revitalize the words and the images of poetry; they have attempted to observe more sincerely the world about them as it is, and their own sensations and emotions as they have them. They have tried to omit as far as possible what might be called the attendant accidents of experience; they would give us in every poem the heart of the matter. To

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this end they have striven for conciseness, brevity and clarity. It would be a stupid kind of critic, no matter how devoted he was to older manners and poetry, who would not recognize and applaud the motives of this young school. But it would be stupid also not to observe that in the pursuit of their ideal these poets, instead of revitalizing their art, are simply retracing the history of poetic language back to its aboriginal meagerness. Language began, let us repeat, in brief personal utterances understood only by the speaker; it developed as the frequent repetition of these sounds taught the speaker himself and his hearers to attach meanings to them. It developed still further as the meanings of words expanded into episodes of common experience—the larger language of poetry. Now that we are destitute of this larger language, the new poets of whom I

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speaking, trying to find the specific word for each idea and sensation, seeking clarity as they understand it, have stripped the noun bare of its adjective and the verb of its adverb, and as far as possible have omitted all but those words whose reverberations may suggest the inmost quality of their message. The result of this practice is obvious in the verse which appears now in most of our magazines; the same result shows itself in much modern painting and in some modern music. You read the poem and perhaps admire some parts of it more than others, since those parts are clearer to you, or you find difficulty in making quite sure what any part means. When the language of poetry was developing toward the hope of complete communication between man and man, the confession that you did not quite understand him would have worried the poet. Nowa-

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days the confession only indicates to him that you do not move in his world. "What does this line mean?" you ask. He may explain to you, if he is amiable, that it means to him the sensation he enjoys when he hears a Beethoven sonata. In your surprise perhaps you exclaim, "I never should have imagined it meant that," and perhaps he will answer, "That is what it means to me." In some such dialogue might be summarized not the least interesting part of the discussion which has been waged on our new poetry. The protagonists in the movement have dedicated themselves to that early condition of poetic utterance in which the poet makes his own language and thereby becomes his own audience and his own critic, each confined to his own little world, because no one else yet understands the language he speaks.

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Yet if American poets were to follow the natural method sanctioned by the usage of the masters, they could find ready at hand much legend of a high quality. The Leatherstocking tales, to name an obvious example, may very well be rewritten from century to century, so long as the romance of the Indian and the charm of Deerslayer's character continue to haunt us. Much in Cooper's style and in his narrative method has ceased to please readers accustomed to greater swiftness and greater precision of statement, but Leatherstocking himself remains a living character about whom later generations, as well as our own, may well have something to say. It would need no great genius to turn such a romance as *Deerslayer* or *The Prairie* to new poetic account. Ichabod Crane and Rip Van Winkle present us with the same oppor-

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tunity from Irving's pages. Indeed only yesterday, as it seems, Joseph Jefferson was acting his version of Rip, and though the American audience hardly realized that the stage hero was not altogether the character Irving portrayed, the second version was closer to the sentiment of our times. There have been other rewritings of this story, and there will be more. The main point is that we should feel no temerity but rather an obligation to tell again the stories, few indeed but perhaps enough to start with, which have taken complete hold of the American imagination. It is easier in the United States to write about Rip Van Winkle than to write about Alexander Hamilton or Thomas Jefferson, for Rip Van Winkle is better known to us. For the same reason it is easier to write about Lincoln than about Washington. It would now be quite

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impossible to write of Benjamin Franklin with any hope that the audience would come to the reading prepared to recognize an old acquaintance. But these characters from fiction which I have mentioned are already part of our national language.

A more remarkable opportunity perhaps which the right poet, when he arrives, will not neglect, is the cartoon figure of Uncle Sam, which awaits only the happy assistance of genius to pass from his sphere of dim but wide popularity into the world of national art. Uncle Sam is perhaps more real now to the majority of American children than Lincoln himself. His features are obviously the product of our life and our climate; the character that he almost has is strikingly akin to ours. If we only knew his family history—who are his relatives, how he earns his living, what



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his voice sounds like when he speaks! The poet who will tell us this will do for Uncle Sam what Cinderella's godmother did for the pumpkin and the lizards—though the cartoon figure is much nearer to the threshold of life than was the raw material of the godmother's magic.

I take it as a happy augury for our literature that many writers to-day, even though theoretically committed to new and revolutionary methods, are instinctively turning to the material of our past for their subjects. To be sure, they usually try to revive some historical episode, forgetting perhaps that America is not very familiar with its own history, and that such episodes of antiquity as the opening of Japan by Admiral Perry will hardly be recognized by the majority of American readers. Yet the tendency to use authentic material as poetic language is itself

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sound, and when more of our poets have cultivated this kind of scholarship, an American poetry can begin.

THE END







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